



An Anthological Collection of Poems and the Like by JAK

Pretty Thing, Pretty Baby, Pretty Much

For Autumn

A Letter To The Reader:

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time out of your day to read some of my work. I really appreciate it. As hard as it is to believe, this is my fifth book, and the second I will be assembling and showing to people. Before I talk about this book, I'd like to pay some tribute to the ones that preceded it. The *very first* 'book' that I assembled and wrote myself was twenty pages long. I unfortunately lost the first copy, but I remember it was called something along the lines of "The Dragon In The House Next Door". It was about a kid and a dragon stealing cookies, and it was cobbled together on a Google Doc at recess with my friends. I showed it to my teacher, and she confiscated it because it was a 'distraction'. Mind you, this was the same teacher who called a parent-teacher conference because my writing was so bad. As an *extremely* mature and not at all petty high school student, suck it, Mrs. Johnson.

The second book (as pretentious as I know it is to call it that) I wrote was titled "My Life" and it was an autobiography. I finished it when I was eleven. I was very proud of it, despite its remarkably confusing format. After the first autobiography, I decided to write a second one. This one was titled "My Ass is Iconic but My Pain is Chronic". Charming, I know. It wasn't as bad as its precursor, thankfully, but it was still quite rough. The most recent of my books is "Eustace Churns The Ocean of Milk". It's a 160-page compilation of my writing- poems, short stories, and a few drafts of

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‘Edith’, an attempted book. Of the four, I am proudest of my most recent. I wrote it in about four months, which is pretty fast for a book. Personally, I’m relatively happy with the result, but I know that it could be more intentional, if that makes any sense. A lot of it is very ‘stream’ (as in stream of consciousness, by the way), which I want to avoid in this book. A good chunk of this project will be as tangible as I can manage, which should be solid. Also, it should be noted that I’ve decided to write this book in British English to honour my favourite author, Roald Dahl. I truly believe he was the greatest storyteller to ever live, and I owe him essentially my whole childhood. Although he died long twenty odd years before I was born, his books were some of the first I ever read. I think I can manage a few extra ‘u’s in his memory.

That’s pretty much all I have to say about the contents of the book, so if you’d like to start reading it now, I wouldn’t judge you. If you’ve got nowhere to be, stay with us in the introduction for a bit longer. I have a few people I would like to thank and dedicate this book to. There are a few I’d like to elaborate on, but I will also include a list of names. Firstly, my relatives, particularly my grandparents. Thank you for always supporting my work and pushing me to keep writing. If it weren’t for the frequent encouragement, I doubt I would get to be in school doing what I love. Secondly, my parents and sibling. Thank you to my parents for buying me a computer to write on. I have named him Grommet (because my phone is named Wallace, of course). I will take very good care of it. Thank you to my sister for irritating me to oblivion,

but occasionally hanging out with me. Finally, I would like to partially dedicate this book to the creative writing conservatory. I have a lot of wonderful friends within it, and I would like to thank them for being equally as nerdy about these things as I. With that, here is “*Pretty Thing, Pretty Baby, Pretty Much*”.

The Yellow Period

Maxwell And Eloise

The rain was warm, contrasted with the chilly morning air. The wind was the kind that made your mouth dry and your nose burn. Maxwell walked quickly down the street. Pops of colour sailed by in his peripheral as he moved down the road- blue, yellow, green, red. A dog barked distantly. Maxwell's deep brown hair, saturated with water, hung loosely like a vine in his face. Raising one lily white hand to his head, he tucked a long strand of hair behind his ear. He passed Cherry- blue, yellow, green, red. He paused in front of a mint green house, its paint chipping away- strange compared to the other houses. A brown stick-weave wreath hung on its dark oak door. Approaching it, he kicked a pink plastic tricycle off the walkway with one wet shoe. He paused on the doorstep, breathing heavily as a blur strangled his eyes. She opened the door- her long blonde hair framed her cream complexion and deep brown eyes. She was beautiful- her slender frame complimented by her extremely long legs. She said nothing and neither did he- they stood in silence for a moment. She smiled.

"You gonna come in, or are you here to make sure the porch is up to code?" She said as she opened the door. He laughed as he walked inside. "Leave your shoes outside, dummy." She smiled. He kicked off his shoes and let his socks brush the brown carpet. A dead Christmas Tree sat on the floor, needles dropping off its wiry branches by the pound. A small boy with a green present in his lap

sat beside it, unmoving, a moment frozen in time. Purple and orange lights shone from another room, blinking every few minutes. Old laughter and sobs filled the air.

They walked to her bedroom and sat on her bed.

“I love you, Maxwell.” She said, “I love you, Eloise,” He said as he leaned in and kissed her. The peach fuzz of her face sent goosebumps down his back as he breathed in her perfume. He wrapped his arms around her. “Promise you’ll never leave me.” She said, breaking the kiss and suddenly looking very far away. “I would spend a thousand eternities with you.” “Until the sun explodes.” She smiled. Slow music on a broken record began to skip quietly from outside. A brown cat, its ears flattened against its head, bolted into the room and under the bed. “Hurry up, we’ll be late for class.” She mumbled against his lips. He broke away and smiled at her sadly. “We graduated years ago, Eloise.” “Leave your shoes outside, dummy.” She said. He hugged her and closed his eyes.

He opened his eyes slowly so the light wouldn’t sting them. His stomach turned as the familiar despondence returned to his being.

“Maxwell Fenning? Maxwell?” A voice said loudly. He stood, turning his head to face the voice.

A nurse, dressed in blue scrubs and sneakers, her hair tied into an Army bun, smiled at him sympathetically. “For Maxwell?” She repeated. He nodded. She held the door to a long hallway and they started towards a room at the end. They paused outside the door. “Can I get you anything? Water?” “No, it’s okay. Can’t keep

anything down.” He said with a chuckle.

The nurse placed a hand on his shoulder. “It will get better.” “I know, thanks. I appreciate it,” He said as he turned the doorknob and entered the room, avoiding her gaze. A doctor and a nurse sat together in the room. The doctor, a tall man who wore the same tacky tie every day, sat behind a large wooden desk. Photos of his family and pure-bred border collies adorned it. The nurse, a black woman dressed in the same garb as the one who’d escorted him, sat off to the side with a legal pad.

“Mr. Fenning. Please sit down.” Maxwell shuffled forward to a chair placed in an intimidating manner before the desk. “Let me begin by offering you my sincerest condolences.” Maxwell mustered a small smile and nodded. “Are you ready to see her?” He looked down at his hands, shaking in his lap, to avoid crying in front of them. “Yes.” He said quietly. The nurse stood and walked out of the room. The doctor stood to assist her as she returned with a large black box in her hands. They handed it to Maxwell. “Take as much time as you need.” The nurse said as they both stepped out of the room. Placing the box in his lap, he paused before gently lifting the lid. Tissue paper lined the small grey vase. He brushed his finger over her name, spelled by grooves in the cool marble. The doctor and nurse returned, walking slower than they had before. “She wishes her ash to be spread in her poinsettias when they bloom this December.” The nurse said quietly as she looked at Maxwell. “Alright.” “We’ll give you a pamphlet on how to properly manage this situation with the discharge papers.” The doctor added. “Okay.”

“I know you mentioned on your sign-in that you’ve been struggling with drinking, and while it may be a temporary escape, losing consciousness repeatedly can leave lasting effects.” He said solemnly. “Don’t tell me how to live my fucking life.” Maxwell said as he stood up, taking the box with him. “We just want to help-” The nurse started. “Help someone who cares.”

Maxwell sat in the rental car, the box buckled into the seat next to him. His eyes burned from rubbing. Bringing his knees into his chest, he sobbed quietly as snow began to fall outside.

He wished he could remember her better. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” He said. He grew quiet, the silence periodically interrupted by a dry hiccup. He started the car without another word, his windshield wipers gathering the dirty slush into a neat line of dirt and ice. He wiped his eyes with his jacket sleeve as the speedometer flirted with 88. He closed his eyes, and, for the first time since he’d lost her, he thought of Eloise and smiled. He thought of Clara, all that she would’ve done if she’d only had the chance to be born. He exhaled smoothly as he jerked the wheel to the left as hard as his strength would allow. A screech, a shower of glass, then nothing.

Maxwell ran down the street, his feet hardly touching the ground as the rain beat his face. He stopped in front of the mint green house with the peeling paint and the brown door. He ran to it, knocking quickly. She answered, mascara streaking her cheeks. “I’m pregnant.” She said. “I know.” He said. He kissed her. “I’ve missed you.” “Shall we name her Clara?” Eloise asked with a makeup-stained smile. “Yes.” He said. “We have to hurry, we’ll be

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late for class.” She said as she pressed her face into his shoulder. It was quiet after that, except for the sound of the rain and their breathing.

Alda and Alba

Alda's eyes felt glued shut as she blinked in the morning light. The rain poured hard outside, unusual for the location and time of year. "Alda," her mother called. Sitting up in bed, she looked sleepily out the window, gazing across the Nevada landscape. Rain pattered against the window as a gust of wind blew through the house. "Alda!" her mother shouted. She placed her feet on the floor, her blanket wrapped about her shoulders in a dramatic cape. Grabbing her favourite headband from the desk next to her bed, she hopped down the stairs; careful to skip the squeak on the fifth. "Go back upstairs right now and change your clothes. You look a fright," her mother said, looking at her from the kitchen. "Like a ragdoll," her little sister added. Alda looked down at her loose white nightgown, stained with pasta sauce and ink. "Oh, shut up, Madeline." Adla scoffed as she started back up the stairs. "Be gracious, Alda. Your sister is only four, she's still learning," her mother said as she began to sweep Madeline's toast crumbs off the tile floor. "Yeah, I'm only four." Madeline chirped. *Four's old enough*, Alda thought as she pushed the door to her room open. Dropping to her knees, she rooted through the chest at the end of her bed. She smiled as her hand returned with a long blue dress. "Alda, what the hell are you wearing?" Her mother said, annoyed, as Alda walked confidently back downstairs. "Yeah, Alda. What the hell." Madeline parroted. "*Madeline*," her mother hissed.

"I'm dressing to the occasion." Alda replied, beaming. "Not to school you're not. Go change." Her mother said, washing dishes. Her father walked in, dressed for work in a crisp ironed shirt and a shockingly bright purple tie. "Aren't you special today, Alda?" He said smiling. Alda grinned at him and twirled the dress. "Go," her mother snapped. "Fine." She walked back upstairs, pausing on the squeaky step and jumping onto the creaky floorboard with all of her strength. "Watch it," her father yelled up the stairs. "Yeah."

Madeline added. "Shut up, Madeline." "*Be gracious!*" Her mother shouted.

Fifteen minutes later, she appeared back downstairs. "See, if you'd just worn that in the first place, you'd have had an extra twenty minutes- why do you have to make everything so hard?" Her mother said, looking at her plain white polo and jeans. "Mom, isn't being myself better than being on time? All the teachers at school tell us to be ourselves." "You can be yourself while dressing appropriately. I'll meet you in the car." Alda sighed. She slid on her plain black flats and her plain black backpack and ran across the lawn, through the pouring rain. She pulled the door to the car open and slumped in the backseat, kicking off her shoes. She pulled her pen and sketchbook out of her bag, scribbling on it intensely. The pen jerked left and right, then a bit down, then off the paper entirely, forming the loose figure of a dog. Alda smiled at the chaotic mass of ink and flipped the page.

She jumped as her mother rapped on the window, soaked by the rain. "That had better not be one of your school books," she said, her

voice muffled by the glass between them. “Unlock this door right now before I break a window.” her mother snapped. “I didn’t lock it!” Alda shouted back. Her mother moved to the front door, pulling on the handle. Alda watched with mixed feelings of fear and curiosity- it wouldn’t budge. Alda screamed in horror as a shadow, about three feet tall, with bright almond shaped eyes, popped up from the passenger seat. “What? What’s wrong?” her mother screamed back as Alda moved as far back as she could, still screaming. “I’m getting your father.” Alda could feel tears pricking her eyes as the shadow stretched itself into a long torso and four arms, climbing with meticulous precision over the car’s centre console. “Please don’t eat me,” Alda said, curling up against the still-locked car door. “Dearest child, I am not here to hurt. I have been looking for someone like you for many years. I hope we shall be great friends.” The shadow said from somewhere within its mouth-lacking entity. Alda slowly turned to face the creature, tears still streaming down her face. “You swear?” She said quietly. “On my honour,” the creature replied, extending one jet-black limb to Alda’s hand. She took it hesitantly, shaking.

“How could we be friends? I don’t even know your name.” Alda said as the creature’s massive eyes blinked slowly. “My given title is not compatible with any language or sound produced by human beings- it’s more of a theoretical concept.” The creature replied, blinking only its left eye as if trying to get something out of it. “What about Alba? So we match?” “Is that what you desire most, child?” “I guess.” “Then it is so.” The creature said. Alda’s mother

and father returned, her father holding a crowbar. “Hurry, Sam!” her mother exclaimed as her father wedged the steel beam between the car’s body and door, pulling with embarrassingly terrible strength. “Seriously, Samuel. Give it to me.” her mother said, irritated, as she grabbed the crowbar and braced her foot against the car. Harnessing her hatred towards her career path, children, and general lifestyle, she yanked on it as the door’s hinges creaked and snapped off entirely. The door squealed open, resisted by the new jags of metal that now protruded from its frame. Her mother thrust the crowbar back into the hands of her appalled husband and climbed into the car. “Alda, I better not hear a word from you until you’re back home today. No calls from the school, no fights, nothing. *Zilch*. You hear me?” “Mom, did you see it? The shadow? It talked to me, Mom!” “Don’t be stupid, Alda.” Her mother shouted as she aggressively put on her seatbelt and slammed the door back into the gaping hole she’d torn it from. Alda rolled her eyes and said nothing, looking out the car window. “Do that one more time and you might not make it to school.” “Okay, okay, Mom. It isn’t even that big of a deal.” “Remember when you fractured that little girl’s nose, Alba? You’re lucky she didn’t need *surgery*.” her mother said, looking into the rearview mirror as she tried to back down the driveway. “She was asking for it.” Alda retorted. “*Enough*,” her mother said through gritted teeth as she turned on the radio. “The traffic and the cars and the road and the stoplights and the car crash wow it’s really windy up here in this helicopter we can really expect some traffic from Wilmslow to Willow to Jackson...”

the radio said. Alda covered her ears. “Don’t be rude,” her mother said, trying to weave through the lines of cars. Her mother reached an opening in the traffic and floored it, pressing Alda back against the seat. “I don’t need to be at school that badly.” Alda said, her hands still pressed over her ear canals. “*Stop.*”

Alda sighed and tapped her feet against the back of the seat in a pitter-patter rhythm. Her mother huffed in annoyance in the front seat. Alda noticed this and quickened her pace. Her mother reached behind her, trying to swat Alda’s feet. “Knock it off,” Her mother said as Alda moved her feet over and began to kick as hard as she could. Her mother was turned around completely now, screaming a string of regretted motherhood in some lost tongue. The world seemed to slow down significantly as the car veered across a lane, then two, then three.

Her mother gasped and turned around instantly, swerving the car to the left. “Shit!” She cursed. The air filled briefly with the honk of over a dozen cars and the horrible words leaving her mother’s mouth. She moved the wheel hard a few times, her grip becoming gentle as the car’s speed became even again and the chaos slowly died away. Her mother was breathing hard. They reached an exit ramp and Alda watched the sky, her heart still beating from the excitement, as her mother took it onto a surface street. They drove for a minute or two in silence. No shouting, no kicking, nothing. It was somehow more upsetting to Alda that way. Her mother pulled off the road into the dirt. “I’m going to call the school. You aren’t going today.” her mother said wearily, the anger in her voice quieter.

“Okay.” Alda said quietly as her mother laid her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. “Mom, when do I-” “Shhh.” Alda looked out at the rain and listened to the soft huff...huff of her mother’s breathing for a minute, not thinking about anything in particular. She noticed a group of birds swirling in the air, circling something on the ground. Opening the door and climbing out of the car, she walked out into the wet desert.

“Vultures,” Alba said as she wandered closer to the pack of birds. They circled intensely, occasionally swooping down to inspect the decomposition of their prey. Alda walked farther out into the desert, her plain shoes squishing the wet sand into indented little ovals. As she reached the eye of the vulture’s storm, she could make out a figure lying on the ground. The rain lightened a little bit as she approached the creature. “Alda, my dearest child.” The creature said. “Alba?” “Yes, yes, that’s right! You remembered, Alda. Now we are truly friends.” Alba said softly, a slight crackle to its voice. It blinked its massive almond eyes. “What are you doing all the way out here? Don’t you have a family?” Alda asked as she sat down in the mud by her friend. “No, my family is scattered about the stars.” “Do they look like you?” “They are similar to the shapes your mind creates when you rub your eyes for a long time.” As Alba said this, she shut her eyes and rubbed them gently as blue and purple geometric figures filled her vision. “They’re wonderful, Alba.” Alda said. “Yes. I miss them very much.”

“Why can’t you see them?” “Ah! Yes, Alda. That is why I need you,” the creature paused and blinked its eyes. Alda noticed the very soft clicking noise that was produced when it did that. “I require a guide to navigate Ebony.” “What’s an Ebony?” “Shush, Alda. One who is not acquainted with Ebony must never say its name.” “A person?” “It is the mind of a dormant being, who has been dormant for many years and shall remain that way forever.” “What happened to him?” “It, child. Your kind is foolish to believe that your chromosome-oriented gender is relevant anywhere but this planet. Dormancy is similar to what you people call ‘death’. When a being does not have the means to sustain life anymore, it cannot continue living. It moves on.” “Where did Ebony go?” “Matter, child, the material which we are composed of, goes nowhere. It is distributed back into the stars to begin the existence of other beings.” They sat in silence for a while, watching the rain fall and the birds swoop. “How do we get to Ebony?” Alda said after a moment. “That is why I chose you, Alda. There are many other life forms on this planet. There are frogs, and beetles, and of course, other children, but the difference between them and you is that you can *see*.” “What do you mean?” Alda asked. “Other beings on this planet could not fathom the concept of Ebony. They would not survive the journey, much less the acquaintance. I believe your mind is ready.” Alba said as it extended its arms. “What’s the acquaintance?” Alda asked as Alba rose up slowly next to her. “May I show you?” “Yes.” Alda said, and the creature wrapped itself around her. It had no breath, no blood. Alda wondered if the thing she held was real- perhaps just a

plume of some strange smoke, arranged into a figure of odd proportions. Alba's eyes clicked next to Alda's ears. Click-snap. Click. Click. The air tunnelled out of Alda's lungs as she suddenly became aware of the mass that no longer existed beneath them. She opened her eyes and saw nothing except the stars and the unsettling consistency of Alba's being.

"Keep your eyes closed- it'll be easier that way." Alba said. Its voice sounded miles from Alda's mind as they raced through the extensions and beats of time, excess nitrogen and empty space coursing through Alba and around Alda. Through the thin membrane of her eyelids, bright lights raced past them. Stars. Millions and millions of them, grouped and scattered- bunched into little patches of explosive colour and heat. Nebulas, galaxies, anything that ever was and would ever be. As they travelled along the seam that connected reality to the mind, Alda allowed new breath to enter her body. "We have arrived." Alba said, releasing Alda from the grip of its numerous arms. "Who is this,-" "Do not speak my name, Ebony. The child must remain intact for her return. She knows me as Alba." "Who is she?" "Alda." Alda said as she looked around her. Big stone walls, covered in vines and red flowers, stood around them. The air was stale, notably thicker than Earth's. A massive curtain of soft pink water fell in front of them, huge and dwarfing, yet silent. Alda breathed the cool mist of the pink water through her mouth- it was tangy, with a note of artificial sugar.

“Come forward.” The voice commanded. Alda moved forward as the pink waterfall split neatly into two separate streams. A large rock, floating above another flat of stone, stood in front of her. “What is this?” Alda asked, approaching the rock carefully. She turned her head to find that Alba was no longer there. “Alba?” The air was silent. “Place your dominant hand on the stone.” The voice said. Alda stood in front of it now, looking down at its massive grey face. She placed her left hand on the rock as it slowly lowered back to the floor. “I am Ebony. We are acquainted.” “I’m Alda. It’s nice to meet you, Ebony.” Alda said loudly. “You may speak normally, I can hear everything. What do you desire most, Alda?” “I want Alba to have its family back.” The voice was quiet for a moment. “Are you sure that is what you request from our time together? I cannot promise we will meet again.” Alda thought about it for a moment. “Yes.” “I understand.” Ebony said. The air whipped suddenly, a gust of wind moving through the room. The sound of the waterfall began, startling Alda. She ran forward as the curtains of water began to close.

Alda moved her body up against the large stone wall and watched intently as a cloud of black and grey ashen matter drew from the air around them and accumulated into Alba once again. Alba extended its arms as a flurry of pink, green, yellow, blue, and orange lights began to flash in the weir of the waterfall, slowly falling in the long streaks of pink water. Alba moved to the bay of the waterfall, shrinking its mass as if kneeling by its shore. The lights swirled slowly around each other in the bay as Alba’s eyes clicked. “Close

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your eyes.” Alda was startled- the voice of Ebony bounced inside her head. As strange as it was, Alda closed her eyes and listened as the musical sound of a reverberated theremin filled the air. “I’ve missed you so much.” She heard Alba say. There was a crack in its voice- barely noticeable, but it gave the effect of tears. Alda turned her head as a blinding blue light filled the air. It was dark after that. “Alba?” Alda tried to say, but the silence was all-consuming. The smell of watermelon filled her nose and swirled around her face as if she were being eaten by it. “Alba?” She heard her voice say. There was nothing. She felt the shadowy arms of Alba surround her again, and they moved through the stars once more. “Thank you, Alda.” Alda said nothing as they jetted through the universe. She awoke on the side of the highway.

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2773 words.

Wicken

Meyrr was a quiet town. Old men sat, talking in pairs on porches, cigarettes hanging from their wrinkled lips. Stray dogs ran across the street. The wind was the only voice for miles. It was quaint; silent. There were only a few children born within the city limits of Meyrr- the rest lived opposite the train tracks, where the school was. Back then, nobody had television. You were lucky if your parents had a record that wasn't classical jazz- we spent the days outside, the nights racing to Slab and back.

Slab was our game. The kids in Saleme will tell you it's theirs- they're liars. The rules were easy. First, wait for dark. Not dusk, not twilight, *dark*. He won't come out if it's too light. Then, a girl stands at the stop sign with the runner. It had to be a girl- he liked them more. The girl would count to four, and the runner would run down Spruce as fast as he could go. They would run all the way to the Wicken house, through the fence, and into the yard. Then, you'd stand there until the door opened and he saw you- until he smiled. The runner would run at him, touch the stoop on the porch with four fingers, and run back.

If you weren't fast enough, you'd see his hand come out. It was an awful thing- sharp and black, like a needle. It had four fingers. We said if you touched the stoop with five, then Wicken would get you. That was our name for him. Mercy from Saleme says she said it first, but it was ours. Wicken was a big, tall man made of

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wire. He moved into the house at the dead end of Spruce when Mrs. Blanchert died. I can still remember the first time we saw him.

It was March. Mrs. Blanchert's daughter, Mavis, and her husband, Leigh, carried big cardboard boxes filled with Mrs. Blanchert's things out of the house. Me, Lars, Louise, and Santhe stood at the fence, watching. Lars was the oldest, ten. Louise was a year his junior, I was seven, and Santhe was four. We twittered like birds at the fence, watching Leigh put the boxes in the back of his truck. We stared as Mavis brought out Mrs. Blanchert's living room television. It was a big black screen, covered in smudges and encased in a massive wooden frame. "Move, I can't see!" Santhe shouted from beneath us.

"No, Santhe. You wouldn't understand anyway." Lars said. Santhe frowned, crossing her arms in defeat. "I wonder if Fred is still inside." Louise said. Mrs. Blanchert's dog, a big yellow golden retriever named Fred, occasionally trotted down the street past our house. Sometimes, we'd catch him on the way home from school and spend a few minutes running our hands through his thick coat of blonde fur. He always smelled like butterscotch and soap. "Ms. Mavis? Can we go see the dog?" Lars shouted across the yard.

Mavis came outside, carrying a massive trunk from the attic. She placed the box on the ground with a heavy sigh and wiped the sheen of sweat from her face. "Alright, but hurry! We need to pack up his things soon." She said, picking up the box again and walking to the trunk. Lars quickly unlatched the gate and we all shuffled inside. "Leave your shoes outside! We've just cleaned."

Mavis shouted. We kicked off our shoes and ran down the hallway to the sun room. Mrs. Blanchert's sun room was big and oak-laden, always doused in golden light pouring in through the six big glass windows on the front wall.

Her touch was still there- a few floral cross stitches hung from the walls in neat wooden frames. Fred laid on the ground, bathing in the sunlight. Santhe laughed as she ran to Fred, grabbing his massive paw. "Be gentle with him, Santhe." Lars scolded as he pulled her hand off. Fred stared at us, thrilled to be given this much attention. He rolled around in the light, his tree branch of a tail pounding the floor.

We sat on the floor with Fred for a while, talking amongst ourselves, drowning out Santhe's occasional attempt to be relevant in the conversation. Eventually, Mavis and Leigh entered the room to clear out the last few remnants of Mrs. Blanchert. "I'm sorry, kids, but you need to go." Leigh said. We stood up, Lars having to drag Santhe off of Fred. We walked down the hallway, and that's when he moved in. His long black fingers dug into the plaster of the walls as he crawled along them, his shadow seeping into the orifices of the house; becoming one with it.

After that, it became a game- stirring the Wicken. It was only a game.

It was the Eve of Halloween- we stood at the stop sign. It was the perfect weather for Wicken- foggy, grey, but not so dark he could not see us. Lars went first. I stood by his side at the stop sign. "One," I began. "Two." "Three." "Four!" And with that, he was

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gone. He ran down Spruce, through the fence. A smack rang through the air as he firmly planted four fingers on the slab. The door creaked open. Lars stood firmly in front of the house. Wicken extended one long hand from the foyer, grabbing the door frame and pulling the better part of his head out.

Lars stood, shaking as Wicken's barely distinguishable mouth began to curve gently into a Cheshire Cat grin. "What are you doing?" I shouted as Lars stood there, unmoving, transfixed. A terrific pattering noise filled the air- similar to the sound made when running across the floor in bare feet. A jet of black, a splash of blood, and the Wicken had beat us. It was his game too.

Melon Collie

David Monroe's life had fallen to bits. He'd been fired from his job, broken up with, and after a nasty fight outside a bar, he found himself perched upon a metal bench in the confines of jail. He sighed as he kicked a ball of dirt around the floor, aimlessly. "Hey, buddy," a voice said. David rubbed his temples. The man in the cell block across from him had been talking, meaninglessly, for the past hour and a half. "Yes?" David said, looking at him wearily. "I bet there's a lot goin' on for you, buddy." The man said, his eyes widening.

"Mhm." David muttered as he looked down and continued to massage his head. "I know someone who helps people out like you, buddy," The man said. "Oh? And who's that?" David asked, trying to be polite. "The Melon Collie." The man said, covering his mouth as if telling a secret. David said nothing, but nodded and mustered a small smile as the man began to quietly chatter nonsense again. Closing his eyes and tapping his feet on the floor in a rhythmic pattern, he tried to drown out the noise.

"Stop that." The man said, suddenly very jittery. "Father hates tapping." "Right. Sorry." David said. His body ached, in desperate need of sleep. Inspecting the metal slat he sat on, a strange puddle of liquid dissuaded him from lying down. The man laughed maniacally at a shocking volume. David gasped and jumped slightly as the man laughed for a moment and suddenly quieted, turning to

face David completely. His eyes were saucers in his skull, the shocking white contrast to the deep brown stubble that coated the lower part of his face.

David looked away as the man rose from his metal bed and stared at David. David's eyes glanced at the man minimally to avoid provocation. The man stood there for over thirty minutes, staring intensely at David, occasionally repeating a word in some strange language. *This is torturous*, David thought to himself as the man began to laugh again. After several hours, a very tired looking police officer stepped between the two of them and unlocked David's cell.

"Your quarantine period has ended, we'll need you to sort out the fine and then you'll be set," the officer said as David eagerly followed him out of the cell block. The two walked to a desk at the front of the police station and David hunched over the counter as he filled out the release paperwork. "You'll receive a bill." The police officer said as David collected his things. "Okay. I'm sorry about this-""Please." The police officer interrupted, showing him out to the street. It was late now, completely dark. David started towards his apartment, moving quickly.

He was startled by a sound behind him. "I don't have anything," David said as he turned around. Rather than a thief, a dog trotted towards him. "Oh. Hello." David said as the dog walked underneath the light of a lamppost. Chunks of matter fell off of the dog as it walked. David stumbled backwards as it drew closer to him. The dog, strangely, was entirely composed of melon-honeydew, watermelon, cantaloupe. The dog reached David and sat

obediently in front of him. *I must've been drugged*, David thought to himself as the dog wagged its tail, sending a shower of fruit juice across the street.

"I am the Melon Collie," The dog said. Its voice was deep and masculine, with a slight growly undertone that rumbled when it spoke. David fell backwards onto the street and began to slowly move backwards in a state of shock. The dog laughed a deep, musky laugh. "I am the Melon Collie." The dog repeated, evidently its only means of communication. "I'm David." David mumbled, wiping fruit juice off of his shoe and picking himself up off the ground. The Melon Collie opened its mouth, allowing a crumpled piece of paper to drop to the sidewalk.

It watched him for a moment with its black seed eyes before bouncing across the street and into the night. David stood there for a moment, unable to think. As the warmth slowly returned to his body, he bent down and picked up the wad of paper. He smoothed it out on his knee and walked into the light of the lamppost. 'I am the Melon Collie.'

Completed on November 13, 2024

An Original Concept by JAK, inspired by "Mellon Collie and The Infinite Sadness" (The Smashing Pumpkins)

734 Words.

Pretty Thing, Pretty Baby, Pretty Much

Natalie's Mexican Vampire Grandpa

Lived in a shack
Down by a brook
Drank lots of pig's blood
Try not to look
Lived to his hundreds
When the blood had pearled
Died in the 70's
Outlived the whole world

Strange Woman

Flats with no socks

Blue metal nails match her eyes

Hair is tied

Sandy blonde

She wears a ring on her thumb

Strange Woman

Pretty Thing, Pretty Baby, Pretty Much

Pretty Thing Pretty Baby Pretty Much

Sleep easy

Pink is traditional

She's maladjusted

Don't just stand there

Not so close

Your body

My choice

Pretty baby

Pretty thing

Pretty much

Sung Over A Sound Collage

मम पादयोः शिशुं स्थापयतु

The River Is Loud

वयं पिकेटवेष्टनं निर्मास्यामः

Winter here is brutal

हरित रैप्सोडी शृणुत

You'll have to listen carefully to hear her tonight

घण्टा भवतः कर्णयोः परितः भवतु

All we have is cinnamon

तस्य माध्यमेन शीघ्रं धावतु

Let the egg drip down your hand

किं भवन्तः अद्यापि तत् अनुभवितुं शक्नुवन्ति

यदि भवन्तः समीपस्थं श्रुतवन्तः, तर्हि भवन्तः तां श्रोतुं शक्नुवन्ति। सा वायुवे अस्ति, सा रात्रौ भाषते। यावत् हिमपातः न भवति तावत् अधिकं कालं न भवेत्।

Dripple- Edited + Extended Version With Weird Ending

Danielle Chryston smiles as she watches the group of children splash about the lake. The year is 1964- “I Want To Hold Your Hand” dominates the music charts, and the signing of the Civil Rights Act takes America by storm. Danielle lived a fly-on-the-wall lifestyle- opting to observe rather than join the herd of the psychedelic-warped druggies that clouded her social life. Given her preferences, she had made the decision to take a volunteer job in Lake Wontanohawk. As school drew to a close, she loaded two duffel bags containing the majority of her earthly belongings into the trunk of her 1959 Pontiac and began the three and a half hour drive to the sparsely populated and overwhelmingly wooden town of Dripple, Michigan.

Less than five thousand people claimed residence in Dripple, with its only tourist-attracting feature being the lake. On a rare occasion, a teenage couple might smoke a joint as they watched the waves lap at the sand; for the most part, however, the lake was utilised only for the yearly children's camp. With roughly five hundred children scattered about Dripple's three mile radius, the camp managed to scrape together adequate funding in its fifty dollar registration fee, keeping it open for one more year. As Danielle pulled into the camp's loose gravel parking lot and stepped into the warm humid air, she suddenly felt as if she were being watched. A young blonde child scurried out of the lot's attached cabin. She

stopped at Danielle's feet, her dark brown eyes staring at her with a frozen look of curiosity.

"Hello, I'm Danielle. What's your name?"

"Sandy," The child said, her eyes unblinking as they bore holes into Danielle's soul.

"Nice to meet you, Sandy. I'm sure we'll become great friends in the next week." Danielle said as she quickly glanced away from the small girl's unbroken stare and started towards the cabin door.

Sandy remained at her feet as she opened the screen door and stepped inside. The cool scent of old wood and cookies greeted Danielle as she placed her bags by the door. She took a moment to admire the intensely rustic aesthetic of the cabin- especially charmed by a vintage wood fireplace placed at the centre of the cabin's back wall. She walked across the faded yellow carpet and onto the fireplace's grey stone hearth. She smiled as she bent down to pick up a whittling of a duck that decorated the floor.

Her slender white fingers explored the smooth edges where the sharp blade had pared away the light flesh of the tree. A painting, which hung perfectly in the open space above the mantle, displayed the image of a brunette woman. Danielle stepped closer, her eyes focused on the thick brush strokes of the background scenery and the woman's striking gaze.

"Who are you?" She said aloud to nobody in particular as she reached out to graze the smooth varnish of the painting.

"Ah, I'd appreciate it if the painting went untouched." A voice said from behind her.

Pretty Thing, Pretty Baby, Pretty Much

Danielle turned, startled. An old woman, her brown hair sprinkled with white flecks of age, smiled at her.

“Oh, my god. I’m so sorry.” Danielle said, stepping away from the painting.

“Don’t worry so much, love.” The woman said with a warm smile. Danielle smiled back, embarrassed.

“I’m here for the counselling job- I’m Danielle. Where should I put my things?” Danielle asked her, walking quickly across the room to grab her luggage.

“Oh, don’t worry about those. I’ll handle them.” The woman offered, stepping towards the bags.

“No, I insist,” Danielle smiled as she lifted both bags with ease.

“My, you’re quite strong, aren’t you?” The woman laughed.

“You’ll do quite well here, I think. You can follow me down this way to get situated, love.” She added as she walked with slightly surprising speed down a dark hallway to Danielle’s right. Danielle followed suit, glancing briefly at the framed pictures on each wall. Photos of children, pets, and group photos, each in a neat wooden frame, stared back at her as she and her escort walked swiftly down the hallway. The old woman suddenly paused and turned to face a darkened oak door.

The woman said nothing at first. They simply stood in the darkness, the silence between them eardrum-bursting.

“Miss? Are you-”

“This one! Ah, I haven’t cleaned this room out in ages, forgive me. You might need to move some things around and make some room,

love.” The woman said, producing a small key that was barely visible in the darkness. She pressed the small object into a brass lock just above the doorknob, and the door creaked open with a sigh of aged wood. Danielle choked on a sudden blast of dust as her eyes explored an extremely cluttered bedroom, decorated with ripping green wallpaper. Boxes of yarn and clothing covered the floor.

A small, neatly made twin bed sat in the corner of the room, collecting dust.

“Sorry for the mess, love.” The woman said as Danielle carefully stepped over an old sewing machine by the door and made her way to the bed. The ancient blue quilt that covered the bed released a cloud of dust as Danielle tossed her bags onto it.

“Thank you,” Danielle said, holding back a cough as she struggled to breathe through the abundance of dirt in the air.

“Oh, don’t be so polite. It was no trouble.” The old woman said.

Danielle began to unpack her bags and clear space around the bed with her foot.

“I don’t think I’ve gotten your name yet,” she said as she turned to face the doorway, surprised to find it empty. Danielle walked towards the hallway, cursing as she tripped over a stray box on the floor. Gripping the door frame for support, she leaned her head out of the room, looking both ways for the old woman, who was now nowhere to be seen.

She turned back to her unpacked bags and was startled to see Sandy rifling through one of them.

“Uh-” Danielle started.

“I was under the bed.” Sandy said, an eerie grin stretching across her small rosy face.

Unsure of how to respond, Danielle mustered a confused nod and Sandy scuttled out of the room and down the hallway.

“Alright, then.” Danielle said to calm the goosebumps that pricked her skin. In the half hour it took Danielle to unpack, she thought about many things. Namely, her fiancé. In fact, She worried about him, all alone out there in Vietnam.

She hadn’t heard from him in weeks. Despite the difficulty of sending letters internationally, especially during a war, she had hoped he would’ve at least tried. Danielle smiled as she remembered how they’d met. It was the fall of 1959. She’d agreed to go to Fall Fling with a boy named Michael. They danced for a while, and he leaned in to kiss her. She recoiled, and he’d taken offence and left early. She perched herself on the curb, alone. She wondered if, had he not been outside smoking, she might have stayed there all night.

She could see his face now, clean-shaven, framed by a wild mess of curly brown hair. Her heart skipped a beat as she remembered her hand in his as he helped her off the curb. Months later, they were engaged. They enjoyed a wonderful relationship for a cruelly short year. Then the letter had come. *Fuck the government*. She thought to herself as she angrily threw her now empty bag to the floor.

She was startled by the sound of laboured breathing behind her. She turned around quickly, only to be met with the widened, unblinking eyes of the old woman. Fear bubbled in Danielle’s body,

though she was careful not to show it. Their eyes met, and the woman's face relaxed into a warm smile. Nothing was said for what seemed like months.

"Are you alright?" Danielle asked.

The old woman turned her head slightly, as if confused by the question.

"Of course, why not, silly?" She said with a chuckle.

"Well, it's just that you seem very on edge." Danielle said, concerned.

"Of course, why not, silly?" The old woman repeated, her head tilting further.

"Sorry?"

"Dinner's ready!" The old woman said, her head jolting back upright and her rigid body relaxing.

"Oh, okay." Danielle said with a nervous laugh.

Danielle smiled as she followed the old woman back down the hallway and into a small dining room. The room was, for the most part, empty. A dark oak table with a slightly yellowed white table cloth stood in the middle of the room, accompanied by a set of four matching chairs. A small cross stitching square reading 'God is Good' hung from the wall next to a china cabinet filled with plates and cups.

"This is beautifully decorated, miss..?" Danielle said as she sat down.

"Strasberger, dear. Margaret Strasberger."

Pretty Thing, Pretty Baby, Pretty Much

A roast, coated in a miscellaneous sauce, steamed on a large floral plate. Potatoes and a pot of soup surrounded it, visibly boiling hot.

“This all looks wonderful, Ms. Strasberger.”

“Thank you, love. I do my best. Have you seen Sandra anywhere?”

“You mean Sandy?” Danielle asked, placing a spoonful of mashed potato onto her plate.

“You must be referring to somebody else, dear. Sandra.” The old woman said as she began to stand up.

Danielle stood to assist her as Ms. Strasberger struggled.

“That’s very kind of you, but I’m sure I can manage.” Ms. Strasberger assured.

“Of course,” Danielle said, sitting back down. “Let me know if you need any help, I know the information pamphlet mentioned you had a condition.”

“Don’t mind me- I’m perfectly fine.” She said as she started back towards the living room in search of Sandy. *Old people and their independence*, Danielle thought to herself as she stuffed a forkful of potato into her mouth. She coughed as the deafening chime of a clock rang throughout the house.

The clock rang nine times, indicating that it was now nine o’ clock at night.

“Time flies when you’re having fun, I guess.” Danielle mumbled to herself. She turned around as it occurred to her that the old woman had not yet returned. Although she turned her head only for a moment, it was enough for her to have thought she’d seen a face.

Taken by surprise, Danielle stood from her chair fully and faced the doorway.

“Hello?” Danielle called out. Her voice bounced from wall to wall, creating an eerie echo that sent chills down her neck. A scuttling noise forced Danielle backwards, causing her to nearly trip over her chair.

She watched in horrified confusion as a blackened hand, its skin peeling away from its bones like an orange, crawled finger by finger around the door frame. Danielle rushed around the table, distancing herself from the hand as much as she could. It gripped the sturdy beam of wood intensely, almost as if something were trying to pull it off.

“Miss?” Danielle called out as the hand’s knuckles whitened in struggle.

“Miss Strasberger?”

Danielle gasped as the hand was suddenly torn away from the door frame with a sickening crunch. She could hear its nails piercing the wallpaper as it was dragged down the hallway.

Shaking, Danielle grabbed her plate and cup and moved it to the other end of the table. She sat down, her eyes glued to the door frame. She speared a small tendon of meat, not taking her gaze from the hallway as she swirled it around in the sauce on her plate. She placed the food into her mouth, chewing slowly. She nearly choked as Sandy suddenly came bounding into the room at top speed, the old woman following suit (only much slower). Sandy and

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Ms. Strasberger quietly sat down as Danielle uncomfortably shifted her gaze towards her plate.

"Hi, Danielle." Sandy said, smiling. Danielle nodded, smiling back as confidently as she could.

"Sandra. Sit right." Ms. Strasberger commanded, shooting Sandy a stern glance. Reluctantly, Sandy took her legs out from underneath her and put her feet on the floor.

"Are you alright, Danielle? You seem a bit on edge, love." Ms. Strasberger said, blowing on a spoonful of soup.

"Uh- yeah. Yes. I just thought I saw something out in the hallway." Danielle said with a nervous laugh.

"Like what?" Sandy piped up.

"Oh, I don't really-"

"Sandra, don't be rude." Ms. Strasberger said as she swallowed a mouthful of soup.

"It's no trouble, really." Danielle said politely, smiling at Sandy.

"So, Danielle, I'm sure a pretty thing like you gets a lot of attention?" Ms. Strasberger laughed.

What the fuck? Danielle thought to herself as she politely smiled back.

"Do you have a husband yet?" Sandy asked curiously.

"Sandra." Ms. Strasberger scolded.

"No, I'm engaged." Danielle replied.

"Congratulations, love. When is the wedding?"

"Oh, we haven't set a date yet, unfortunately. He was drafted to Vietnam a couple years ago. It's hard to keep in touch."

Ms. Strasberger nodded knowingly.

“It’s almost thirty two years to the day that I lost my Henry.”

“He drowned!” Sandy exclaimed, smiling.

“*Sandra.*” Ms. Strasberger said through gritted teeth.

Danielle leaned back in her chair as she finished the last bites of dinner.

“That was amazing, Ms. Strasberger.”

Sandy jumped from her chair and started towards the hallway.

“Sandra, remember your manners, please.” Ms. Strasberger said as she polished off the last spoonfuls of soup in her bowl.

“Thank you for dinner.” Sandra said as she began to skip happily down the hallway and out of view.

Ms. Strasberger nodded in response, collecting her dishes in one arm and motioning for Danielle to hand hers over.

“Oh, don’t worry. I can handle it myself.” Danielle said with a smile.

“If you’re sure, dear. I wouldn’t want to trouble you since you just got here. You’re probably exhausted.”

“No, no. Not at all. I can manage.” She said as she stood up and made her way out of the dining room.

“Where’s the kitchen?” She asked Ms. Strasberger.

“Go into the den,” Ms. Strasberger instructed.

Danielle walked quickly down the extremely dark hallway and found herself back in the carpeted living room that she had first stepped into.

“Alright, what now?” Danielle called back. Silence.

“Ms. Strasberger?”

An unfamiliar door caught her eye.

“Is it this one, to the left?” Danielle yelled as she opened the door, balancing her plate and silverware in one hand.

She opened the door and was surprised to see the dining room she’d just exited. Sandy, along with many other children, now sat at the table. Danielle stumbled a bit, struggling to comprehend the possibility of the situation she’d found herself in. To further complicate things, Ms. Strasberger emerged from a door to Danielle’s right, carrying a large pot of soup.

“I thought you’d never wake up! The other children have arrived, and Becky should be here soon.”

Danielle stared blankly at the children, then at Ms. Strasberger. Was this a joke?

“Very funny. Are there multiple rooms that look alike here, or what?” Danielle laughed.

Ms. Strasberger looked at her, confused.

“Are you alright, Danielle? You seem a bit flustered.” Ms. Strasberger said as she placed the pot of soup on the table and began to ladle it into the children’s bowls.

“No, I- what?” Danielle said.

“Want me to take that for you?” Ms. Strasberger asked, holding her hands out to her. Danielle looked down at her arms to see that she was now holding a backpack that did not belong to her.

“Whose is this?” Danielle asked worriedly.

“Yours, who else’s?” Sandy said with a laugh.

“Sandra.”

“Sorry.”

Danielle stepped backwards into the living room, shutting the door in the confused faces of Ms. Strasberger and the mysterious children. She walked quickly to the stone hearth of the fireplace, tossing the backpack onto it. She dropped to her knees, unzipping the backpack. She lifted out a jacket, far too small for her, and studied it curiously. She stood up quickly, causing her head to throb as blood was forced through her body.

She ran swiftly back down the hallway to the dining room she had originally left and bolted through the door, panting.

“Danielle! What’s wrong?” Ms. Strasberger said worriedly as Danielle fought for breath.

“Where are the other kids?” Danielle asked, wheezing.

“They won’t be here for another few days, why?” Ms. Strasberger replied.

“No, they were just here, I-” Danielle started before quietly walking out of the dining room and outside. Tugging a silver chain with a small key attached to it from her neck, she unlocked her car and slumped into its leather front seat.

She opened the glove box hastily, papers and speeding tickets fluttering to the floor. Her hands fumbled about in the small compartment, producing a little orange pill bottle.

“Just to get through today.” She muttered as she tapped out three of the elongated white pills. She grimaced as she choked down the medication with the little saliva in her mouth.

As the chemical taste of pill coating lingered on her tongue, her mind began to wander.

“In your case, I see it best to start on a mildly strong anti-psychotic.” The doctor said, writing something down on his clipboard.

“Am I crazy?” Danielle heard her own, much younger, voice say.

“No, of course not. Don’t be stupid, Danielle.” Her mother said, not looking up from her magazine.

“No, Danielle. You are not, by any means, insane. However, the type of auditory and visual hallucination you are reporting is something to be treated in a timely manner.”

Danielle’s skin prickled as her mind reanimated itself in the present. Her hand shook, rattling the pills around the plastic container in a jittery rhythm. She opened the car door and stood up, stabilising herself against the hot paint of the car. Ms. Strasberger opened the cabin door, walking to Danielle as fast as her age would allow.

“Danielle, are you alright? Danielle?”

“Yes, I’m okay, thanks.” Danielle said as she slowly pushed herself out of the awkward leaning position she’d assumed.

“Well, ‘okay’ might not be enough, Danielle. Are you *sure* you’re alright?”

Danielle took a deep breath, revelling in the brief internal refresh.

“Actually,” Danielle said, “I’ll tell you about it in a bit, I have something I need to do.” She started quickly towards the door.

Originally, I ended this story prematurely with a different ending, which I recently realised I saved. Here is that, but be warned, it is not very good.

Dripple: The Shittier Ending

Brief Context:

I know it was really unclear what I was trying to do with the pills and the hallucinations and everything- I was attempting to capture a mental illness and failed. This ending was intended to reveal that Danielle was actually a criminal trapped in a coma- her mind had created her whole life. I had this idea after I remembered a two sentence horror story I read somewhere (also, I didn't really want to continue the story and just wanted it over with). Obviously, this version is abandoned- I wrote it, leaned back in my chair, and thought: *Holy shit- this is absolutely terrible*. I've had that feeling about my writing many, many times- it didn't surprise me or anything, but looking back at this, it's really bad. I mean, obviously, the other ending is bad too, but this is just atrocious writing and a bad attempt to tie off loose ends and finish a story I didn't want to continue.

I deleted this ending from *Eustace Churns*, and then apparently went back and saved it to my drive. Why I did so is a mystery to me, but I think it's terrible and funny at the same time, so here you are.

Danielle opened her eyes, tears spurting from her eyes as the light pierced her retinas. A nurse prepared an IV next to her bed.

“Where am I? What’s happening?” She asked. The voice that rasped from her throat was deep and male.

“Sir, you’ve regained consciousness from a two week coma. The police will be in shortly to take you back into custody.”

“What the hell do you mean ‘*police*’? I’m supposed to be at work!”

“Mr. Denbrough, you’ve been incarcerated at Indiana Pen. since 1980. You’re not out of a job. It’s not uncommon for victims of head trauma to experience hallucinatory dreams. ” The nurse said, irritated.

“What the fuck is happening?” Danielle croaked.

The nurse narrowed her eyes into a cruel glare.

“You sicken me. I hope you burn in hell for what you did to those people.”

Suddenly, a surly and angry-looking police officer walked into the room.

“John Alistair, I’m Officer Meyrtle. Can you walk?”

“My name is Danielle Chryston, and I swear to fucking God, I will sue whoever is doing this.”

“That’s enough, Mr. Alistair. Stand up. Now.”

“I didn’t do anything! This is absolutely ridiculous.”

“You’ve been charged with six counts of second-degree murder, four counts of rape, and one count of manslaughter. Stand the fuck up.”

he said as Danielle shifted awkwardly on the bed and tried to get up. A cord wrapping itself around her ankle, she felt herself begin to trip backwards. She fell hard, striking her head on the bedside table.

Blood gushed from a gaping crack in her skull as she gasped from the shock.

“Holy shit.” She heard the man say as he rushed out of the room.

Hours seemed to pass before a group of doctors, some men, some women, came sprinting into the room.

“Page a neurosurgeon.” One said.

“We don’t have one on site today.” Another replied.

A monitor began to beep furiously as Danielle’s eyes slowly swirled with ashy grey spots.

“We’re losing him!” She heard a woman shout. Danielle’s eyes flickered from colour to black as a very strong man (or woman, she didn’t have the capacity to tell), began performing CPR. A loud cracking noise filled the air as the person continued to push all of their weight onto Danielle’s chest.

“What the hell was that?” A man shouted.

“Ribs. Happens sometimes. I’m gonna hit the vending machine, do you guys want me to grab anything?” She heard another say.

“I could eat.” A woman replied as the pressure in Danielle’s sternum area slowly came to a halt and her vision was consumed with blackness.

“Page the morgue.” A woman said.

“Does he still have a shot?” Officer Meyrtle asked.

“Who cares? The guy’s a monster.” The woman shrugged as she followed her coworkers out of the room.

Well, thank God that's done. It could've been worse, I guess.

The Orange Period

As I write this, I am in a goofy spiral of emotions that is getting goofier by the day. By the time I complete this section, it may be worse or better (better, fingers crossed), but *currently*, I am in Shitsburg, USA. Due to the nature of the situation, I am currently experiencing emotions I didn't know were possible. As an autistic teenager with raging hormones, it sure is fun having to decode my own thoughts like Morse.

For example, today, I was laughing with some friends and suddenly I thought: *Why do I feel like I want to swan dive into a volcano?* Spoiler alert- I never figured that one out. Thank God (nice try, I'm still an atheist), it's not the same thing as depression. I'm doing okay. It's similar to my short lived 'angsty' phase from my late childhood. I wore all black, listened to music with no-no words, and wore bright red Converse with every single outfit. I was, as the French say, a poser. If I become a poser again, I give you, dear reader, permission to strike me dead with the nearest weighted object.

Thankfully, it was only a few months before I acquired access to a foreign object called 'a mirror', so the poser phase ended pretty fast. My point is, I'm hopping between angry and sad and blah. I don't know who spilled coffee on my mental controls, but I feel like absolute *balls* right now. The situation I'm in is not looking like it's going to improve anytime soon, so this might be a decent

segment. Sadly, (to expand, sometimes this phenomena is annoying)
my writing typically reflects how I'm feeling.

I just took a break because I found out they added Sour
Patch Kids to our school vending machine- best three dollars I ever
spent. I am happier now.

Anyway, here is the orange period.

Pretty Thing, Pretty Baby, Pretty Much

Where Babies Come From

Somewhere in the rural woodlands of western Iowa, there is a storm drain. It is stone and cracking- covered with lush moss and shrubbery so dense no light can reach its depths. Raccoons stash their findings outside of its tiny opening. Deep within the storm drain, there was a pool- a wealth of wet moss and leaves. The bacteria, mixing with the slurry of decomposed animals, began to blend and twist into long loops of flesh. Blood began to form, weaving its way into the long ropes of sinew that lined the walls of the storm drain. The process, in its entirety, took seven months and two weeks. Once the genetic material had incubated to the point of mass, the storm came. The rain washed over the land in monsoons, filling the storm drain to its limit with water. The baby, now fully formed, floated down the tunnels and inner workings of the drain, eventually exiting through the tightly packed opening of moss. Fliberdejibit, a monk of Skrig descent, ventured into the Iowan wilderness in search of the newly birthed children. He'd collect four or five on a good day- loading them into his truck. Delivering the children added a layer of complexity- sometimes, it was hard to tell which couple was viable and desiring a baby. Occasional mistakes were made, resulting in Floberdejobit-Fliberdejibit's brother- removing the children before they were born. The Skrigs, a colony of advanced, humanoid aliens, had created Earth a mere thousand years prior. The birth sequence was put into effect with much debate. Some suggested a shipment

system, but, due to the nosy nature of human beings, the Skrig's secrecy would be in jeopardy. Instead, a placebo creature was placed within the mother, causing her to swell into what humans had coined 'pregnancy'. The creature, a slimy, peach colored thing from the planet Toreh, was a parasite- skilled in its craft.

Once within its host, its long tendrils, undetectable by human nervous systems, explored the brain of the host. It recognized the desire for a baby within the human, and, in knowing such, twisted itself into a form seen by ultrasound as a fetus. Over the next nine months, while the baby was being formed and collected, the parasite, which called itself Steven, consumed roughly ten percent of the mother's intaken food and nutrients.

Some humans, desperate for a child prodigy, play classical music into their abdomens in an attempt to enlighten the unborn child. Some intake vitamins to help the growth of their baby- Steven is highly annoyed by both of these actions, and, in response, often makes the human very ill. Common symptoms of an annoyed Steven are vomiting, morning sickness, bloating, and headache.

At the end of the nine month period, the human goes into a process called 'labour'. Unbeknownst to the human, Fliberdejibit has already replaced the parasite with the baby. This operation occurs while the human is sleeping- the belly button is stretched open, and the baby is placed inside. Some tubes are attached to the baby inside the stomach so it doesn't fall out too soon, and then it's born. Sometimes, defects occur, but mostly, both men are good at this. The baby is born, and the Skrigs remain in the shadows.

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Deus Ex Machina- A Writer's PSA

It was a nuclear war. Ash and debris rained down from the sky onto Giovanni, the last survivor. Blistering heat filled the air, burning his skin as he walked through the massive dust cloud. Around him, buildings crumbled and fell, raining rock and cement onto the bodies of those below. Giovanni swore under his breath as he tripped over a raccoon, scuttling across the debris field.

All of a sudden, the sky opened up, and, on a white cloud, a time machine descended in front of Giovanni. Complete with a thorough instruction manual, it was perfect. He stepped inside. Setting the date to five years prior to the war, he smiled as he imagined the peaceful world he would save. He arrived at the leader's office, just in time to stop him from putting pen to paper. They engaged in a smooth and easy conversation, discussing the alternate options to nuclear war. The war was avoided, and all went back to normal.

The Pill- An Answer To The Question: “How Much Can I Make Happen In A Single Piece?”

Beck stared at the little blue pill in his hand as the sink faucet ran. Tears formed in his eyes as he watched its shiny coating blur to matte. It was April. Three months had passed since he'd done it- long enough to let the dust settle, but a drop in the bucket to his sanity. Each time he closed his eyes to sleep- even *blinked* a moment too long, he saw her face. The blood, crimson, leaving trails of wet behind as they trickled over her eyelids. Illusive, fleeting sounds of violence filled his ears the moment it was quiet. His episodes- the brief windows of madness he'd experienced since his teenage years, could only be suppressed for so long. The weight in his pocket made him grimace.

Since April, he'd teetered on the brink of madness with each passing second. In sleep, his dreams reflected the torment of his waking hours. Taunting anxiety filled his mind- he imagined himself, ripped to shreds by a jury, sentenced to death. He'd never survive in prison. He felt a bead of sweat drip from his hairline, combining with the salt of his tears as it gathered on his face. Without thinking, he placed the pill into his mouth and ducked his head beneath the faucet, allowing a jet of water to enter his lips. He grimaced as he felt the pill wash down his throat.

He stood, his face dripping with the remnants of breakdown and water. He tried to fathom the magnitude of what

he'd done. Falling backwards slightly, his back hit the wall. He gasped, choking desperately for air as his mind raced. He gathered himself, walking out of the bathroom. His face, his body- numb. He felt nothing but the carpet beneath his feet as he walked. His wife, Marlowe, stood in the kitchen.

"What the fuck happened to you?" She laughed, looking upon her husband, who was struggling to stop shivering.

Beck approached her quickly, nearly knocking the plate of food she carried out of her hand as he grabbed her by the waist. He kissed her, closing his eyes as a tear fell from one. Marlowe placed the plate on the counter next to them, using her newly freed hands to wipe the tear from her husband's face.

"What happened? What's going on?" She said, worry setting into her face.

Beck looked at her and said nothing. How could he? He'd be gone soon. He thought of Marlowe, heartbroken, destroyed. She'd have to organise the funeral, manage his inheritance, cope with grief. How could he do this to her? The reality of the situation struck Beck like a rock through a window- he released her, rushing back to the bathroom. He slammed the door behind him and rubbed his face with his hands, trying to feel something, anything.

He fell to his knees in front of their toilet, shaking. He shut his eyes and, in a blink, thrust two fingers to the back of his throat. He gagged, throwing up something of an indefinable color. He flushed the vomit down the toilet, gasping for breath. He rinsed his mouth in the sink before sitting down and attempting to reach some

sort of equilibrium. He stood after a while, opening the door to the bathroom. Marlowe stood outside, a look of fear in her eyes.

“Beck, what the hell is happening?” She demanded.

“Nothing. Everything’s fine, don’t worry,” he said, his words a blatant lie. He approached Marlowe, taking her head in his hands.

“Your eye makeup is beautiful. What is that, glitter?” He asked.

Marlowe took his hands off her.

“I’m not talking about anything else until you explain yourself.”

Marlowe said, staring at him.

“It’s okay. Nothing is wrong. Just felt a little sick.” He said, brushing past her and into the kitchen. Marlowe watched, confused, as he rooted through their refrigerator. He pulled a mass of food from it, placing it on the counter and grabbing bowls and pans from the cabinet. He cracked two eggs into a bowl before stirring in a bit of heavy cream.

“I’m serious.” Marlowe said, her voice loud over Beck’s aggressive stirring.

“Hello, serious, I’m Beck.” He said, not looking at her.

“You know, you’re really sick. You know that? You’re sick.” She said as she walked away. Beck hummed quietly as he poured the egg mixture into a pan, adding cheese. After a moment, he entered the living room with a hastily made omelette. Marlowe sat on the couch, staring as he made himself comfortable in his favorite chair and switched on the television.

“What’s wrong with you, scaring me like that?” Marlowe asked as Beck adjusted himself.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, Marlowe. Can you just drop it, please?”

He asked, looking at her. Marlowe sighed in annoyance and turned her attention to the mind-frying game show on TV. She felt something was wrong, despite her husband’s drop-of-a-hat switch in temperament. This sort of behavior was unusual- he hadn’t even cried when she miscarried last fall. Beck stood, finishing the last bites of his omelette and carrying the plate back into the kitchen.

“You’d better put that damn plate in the dishwasher. I’m not cleaning up after you, you’re a grown man.” Marlowe shouted.

“Nobody has said anything, Marlowe. Sew a quilt or something, would you? Women like to sew, right?”

“Oh, fuck off, Beck. You’re an asshole.” She said.

“And yet, here we are, husband and wife.”

Marlowe stood up, entering the kitchen.

“You know, I’m really sick of you,” she said. Beck hummed a tune quietly as he rinsed his plate and placed it into the dishwasher. He turned to her.

“You never do anything around here, I always have to clean up after you. You don’t know your ass from a hole in the ground, and you’re thirty and working a dead-end job. I’ve been waiting for you to change for ten years now- *ten years*. Do you know what I heard from everyone, a fifteen year old dating a twenty year old dropout? I think I’d like a divorce.”

With that, Beck reached into the pocket of his pants, drawing a small gun his father had presented to him. *For serious situations only*, the accompanying card had read. This seemed fitting.

“Beck- what? What are you doing?” Marlowe stammered, backing up.

“What I need to. I’m a killer, Marlowe.” Beck said, his eyes wide and intense as his fingers shook against the metal body of the gun.

“No, Beck. You aren’t. You’re not like that,” she said.

“You don’t fucking know me, Marlowe.”

“I do, I do! I love you.”

“You know what I love? Blood. I’d like to see yours.” Beck retorted, watching as Marlowe’s terrified expression intensified. Marlowe continued to mumble an incoherent stream of unintelligible words as Beck clicked the gun’s gears into place, lining up his eye with the sight. He aimed. Marlowe screamed. He felt his finger press the trigger- a deafening pop echoed across their home as she fell back, dead.

“Finally, some fucking silence.” Beck said as he looked numbly upon the corpse of his wife.

He walked outside into the bright sunshine. Across the road, children played in the jet of a garden hose. His neighbor, Archie, walked to his car, his infant daughter in his arms. He approached him, placing the gun back into his pocket as Archie worked to place the baby in the car.

“Hey, Archie!” Beck called. Archie turned, a smile breaking onto his face.

“Beck! It’s been a while! How’s Marlowe doing? Still sick?”

“Ah, she actually went to her sister’s today. Won’t be back for a week, if you can believe it.” Archie looked behind Beck.

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“Did you spring for a flight? Your car’s still here.”

“I drove her. Can’t stand to be away from her longer than I have to.”

“That’s great, Beck. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks- hey, who’s this?” Beck said, approaching the car. The baby sat in its odd little bucket seat, staring at him.

“Mary.”

“She’s gotten so big!” Beck said, reaching out to the baby, who grabbed his hand, intrigued.

“Yeah, she’s my girl.”

“I’m sorry I gotta do this,” he said to the baby, who smiled at him.

“Do what?”

As Archie smiled at him, Beck whipped the gun from his pocket and fired. In an instant, he was gone. Shocked from the noise, the baby began to cry, its piercing wails irritating Beck. He placed his hand over the baby’s mouth.

“Stop doing that.” He said. The baby’s face was red, and tears still fell from her eyes, but she remained relatively quiet. Archie’s wife, Lucille, came running out of the house. Upon noticing the dead body of Archie, she placed her hand over her mouth, slightly muffling the scream she produced.

“Relax, it had to happen.” Beck said calmly. Lucille began to cry.

“Here, this should help,” Beck said as he reloaded the gun with a packet of bullets from his jacket pocket. Lucille, too shocked to move, stood, staring at the lifeless remains of her husband. Without thinking, Beck pointed the barrel of the gun towards the

grief-stricken mother and fired. She fell to the ground. The baby began to screech again.

“God, do I always have to do everything?” Beck muttered as he lifted the baby from the car.

“Hey, could you shut up?” He said to the baby. She didn’t oblige.

“It’s really annoying when you do that,” Beck said. The baby continued to cry, despite having no idea what she’d just witnessed.

“Alright, you asked for it.” Beck said as he started towards the house. He entered, stopping at the doorway. The house was remarkably clean.

“Anyone else in here?” Beck shouted over the baby’s cries. Met with silence, he walked forwards, towards a long hallway. He peered into each door that lined it- the master bedroom, a bathroom. He reached the end of the hallway, stopping at a door with a yellow sign that hung from it. ‘*Mary*’ the sign read. Beck stared at the painted cursive letters for a moment as the baby began to quiet.

“So this is where they’re keeping you?” Beck said to the baby, who looked at him, confused. He opened the door, entering the room. Various articles of baby furniture filled it- complimenting its yellow theme. He approached a large, wooden crib. Painted a comforting off-white, several stuffed animals lined it. He placed the baby, who was beginning to cry again, inside.

“What do you want?” Beck said to the baby, irritated. The baby looked at him, her cries ceasing. Her massive eyes stared up at him. Beck looked around the room, his eyes stopping on a stuffed duck on the floor. He picked it up, shaking it in front of Mary.

“You want this, you weird little thing?” He asked. The baby laughed as Beck continued to shake the duck in front of her. She reached out to it, smiling. Beck dropped it into the crib. Mary happily grabbed the duck, stuffing its bill into her mouth.

“You’re disgusting.” Beck said as he watched Mary chew the stuffed animal, which had been on the floor not moments prior. Police sirens distantly rang. Beck looked at Mary, who looked back, content.

“See ya, kid. And take that ratty thing out of your mouth. You’ll catch your death,” he said, pulling the duck from Mary’s hands. She began to cry again, her tiny hands reaching towards the duck.

“No. Actions have consequences.”

Beck sat down on the floor, his back leaning against the wooden bars of the crib.

“Actions have consequences,” he repeated aloud as he stared at the little duck in his hands. He sat there, unmoving, unbeknownst to the fact that the police were just arriving at the house. A deep burning sensation filled his chest as he laid on the floor, groaning. The pain intensified- the pill had dissolved.

“Finally.” Beck said. He closed his eyes as a stabbing pain filled his body. He was dead a minute later.

Four police officers entered the room to find Mary and Beck. One of them dropped to the ground, checking Beck’s pulse.

“He’s gone,” she said.

“Piece of shit. Call the mortician.” Another said as the woman lifted Mary and walked out of the room, leaving his body.

How The Cream Freezes - A Meaningless Rhyme Poem

Father in the bedroom
Car is in the yard
This is how the cream will freeze
When the wind blows hard

The night is hot
My room is cold
We had better freeze the cream
Before we are too old

Kennedy is shot
Society is dead
Freeze the cream
Hide in bed

Iron curtain
All is lost
This is the second Holocaust
The cream is cold
The rug is warm
Let the bombs drop
Children swarm

Tip the glass

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Stay out late
This is the common woman's fate
We'll be here
When he's dead
We'll have our cream
And our bread

Well, wasn't that a strange little thing? I thought of this during class and whipped out my notes app to write it down- I just found it recently. It's pretty rough, to be honest, I just wanted to see if I could rhyme a whole piece without Googling words. I did it!

I Can't Find Mother Anywhere- A Whiteboard Comp.

I can't find mother anywhere. She's not in bed or in the garden or in her favorite chair. I've been up since a quarter past five, and I still haven't seen her. In fact, the last I saw her was last night's dinner- pork and stew. Mother spoke of the day's affairs and teased me about the bouquet of flowers the neighbor boy had given to me. Father looked on reproachfully. Mother smiled at father, stoking the flames of his dour mien. Yes, that must've been the last I saw mother. I walk into mother and father's bedroom- she isn't there, of course. The big brass trunk at the edge of their bed- the one I used to hide in as a child- catches my eye. I lift its heavy lid with a creak. My eyes widen. I've found mother- where could father be?

American Nightmare

Warning in advance- this is one of the more fucked-up things I've written. I wrote it in Middle School after the Nashville shooting- even though it was far from the first (or last) school shooting of my lifetime, it stuck with me because I was old enough to understand the impact. Also, it was an elementary school. I'd like to take a moment to list the people who were killed in the Covenant (Nashville) School shooting:

Evelyn Dieckhaus (9)

William Kinney (9)

Hallie Scruggs (9)

Cynthia Peak (61)

Mike Hill (61)

Katherine Koonce (60)

The October air brushes the fine hairs just above my hairline across my face. My legs muscles strained against the tough uphill climb to P.S. 68. Music blasted through my earbuds, satisfyingly in time with the beat of my footsteps. The cool wind, previously blocked by the hill, now worked its way into the folds of my jacket, sending a light chill through my body as I reached the hill's plateau.

The sky is blue, cloudy- not overcasted, but just enough to

make an old person say "looks like rain". Orange, yellow, and partially green leaves littered the ground beneath my feet, creating a nostalgic crunch each time I stepped. I pass by the parents in the drop-off lane, shouting at their kids for making them late to work. I cut through the long line of cars, crossing the median and main road to the school. As I walked through the doors, the familiar smell of state-approved microwave chicken lunch and library books blew over my face, eliciting a brief grimace.

As I walked through the hallway full of Croc-wearing future sex offenders and girls with a crust of makeup over their natural skin, I thought about the upcoming Halloween, and the candy trail my friends and I had worked on for the past month. The pleasant thought of Halloween candy-induced diabetes bounced warmly around my head as I shoved my backpack into my locker.

I made my way to class as the bell rang, sitting in my usual seat. Second to last row, on whichever side is harder for the teacher to see. It's the best seat because the super-senior failures sit behind you on their phones and rarely snitch on you for cheating or whatever. The last gaggle of kids made their way into the class as the teacher muttered a "you're late, get a slip", not bothering to look up from his computer. The principal began his usual lecture on the intercom, giving me a solid five minutes to zone out.

My eyes lazily stared at the clock as it ticked past 8:23. The teacher stood, turning his attention to the agenda scrawled in what was either an ancient language or bad handwriting. Mindless drivel ensued for the next twenty minutes. I held my head in my hands,

drifting into a hazy half-sleep. The only thing was, I actually fell asleep. I woke up thirty minutes later to the intercom crackling again, which was odd considering the school had a very strict no-interruptions policy.

"Teachers and staff, please lock your doors and windows, we are initiating a hard lockdown." He said sullenly into the mic. Worried looks bounced about the room as the teacher, confused, locked the doors and windows and resumed teaching. A minute later, firecrackers started going off in the hallway, loud pops echoing towards our room. The teacher's demeanour instantly changed as he rushed to turn the lights off.

"Everybody get down, find a place to hide." He said calmly. I rushed underneath my desk as footsteps drew nearer. More banging. That's when the screaming started. A few kids started crying, some were praying. Suddenly, the glass windows that separated us from the hallway shattered and I watched in horror as a figure climbed through the broken glass. Shards crackled under his feet as he moved about the glass. I recoiled in horror as shots were fired. I held my breath as he approached my desk in the dark.

Another bang.

Then nothing. Silence.

I love you, mom and dad.

This story is dedicated to the memory of the brave people who have lost their lives due to gun violence, and to Khloie Torres, a young girl who called police during the Uvalde school shooting. For more information on school shootings-

sandyhookpromise.org

A Brief Interruption

Well, guess what? I just found yet another ‘Edith’ attempt buried in the pile of crap on my desk! It just wouldn’t be one of my books without an ‘Edith’ excerpt, now would it? It’s really nothing like the other ones, which is a little strange. I like this version- although I’m not keen on finishing it. Also, as annoying as it is, (sorry about it in advance), the perspective continually switches throughout the story. It also doesn’t have a consistent past-present tense flow. Sorry. Anyway, as shabby as they are, here are the chapters I saved- I think they fit well into the orange period.

'Edith' Attempt I'd Forgotten About Until Five Minutes Ago

One

The feeling of eyes upon me sends chills up my spine. The night is blustery and cold, the raw air like a slap. The oak trees, blackened by the darkness of night, loom over me, blocking out moonlight. I slap my red Dollar Tree flashlight and it flickers to life, casting a narrow beam upon the leaf bathed ground. I move quickly, my typically lethargic demeanour energised by paranoia. The crunch of leaves beneath my feet creates the illusion of multiple sets of footsteps. I jerk my head around, expecting an axe murderer to slash me into confetti as soon as our eyes meet. The flashlight's dull yellow radiance dims and then dies.

"This damn thing..." I swear under my breath as I continue to sharply smack the flashlight's cheap plastic exterior. The flashlight's beam teases me, flickering, makes me think it'll turn on with one more smack, but its light turns out, leaving me to blindly stumble in the darkness. I hear a crunch behind me, and I let out a shrill screeching sound. Upon confirming my solitude, I reluctantly turn my head back into place and continue on my mission. As my eyes adjust to the dark, I can make out the figure of the shed where the boat is kept.

I swear I'll come back with a hefty tank of Kerosene and a box of matches and burn that damned thing down to hell where it belongs one day, but I temporarily remove the thought from my head and approach the door. I pull my keys from my backpack's pocket to open it, but as I glance down at the handles, I see the lock

and chain that once held them together now hang limply against the heavy duty plastic door.

"Shit." I curse. Somebody beat me to it. It takes every atom of my being not to turn around and run back to my car, to safety and air conditioning, but as I stare at the now scarred gash on my palm, I remember the cause and the promises made.

"God be with me, and if I am to meet you at the gates of heaven tonight, I trust you will greet me with open arms." I placed my hand on the shed door and firmly yanked it open. It struggles against the thick barrage of leaves on the forest floor, but opens after some persistence. The stale air, laced with the scent of orange Clorox wipes wafts into my nostrils, reanimates nostalgic memories of home. I enter the shed and lift the muddy blue tarp which covers the boat.

"Hello again, you old piece of scrap iron." I mutter.

The chipping black letters on the side of the boat read 'The Esme', perhaps named after a carnival fortune teller. I push my weight against the side of the boat, shifting it over several feet. A small black safe, stolen from a hotel, sat semi-buried in the soft dirt. Kneeling down, I type in half of the combination numbers.

The pad of my finger grazes the weathered silicone of the number eight as a quick and sharp pain fills my head and neck with a paralysing warmth. The muted greys and blacks of the night time blend into a soft palate, confusing my eyes and mind. I felt my hair sink into the black dirt beneath me as I struggled to remain conscious. My brain ached, trying desperately to grasp onto what it

was seeing- to find a tangible ledge to hold. My face twitched as my eyes came into focus again, revealing the panels of the shed. I pulled myself off the ground, a considerable chunk of earth knotted into my hair rising with me.

I brushed the back of my head with one numb arm, striking a black chunk of mud containing a young pink earthworm to the floor. I screamed as the worm twisted what I assumed was its head around, trying to make sense of its surroundings that appeared to no longer be the cool crust of the earth. Instinctively, I sent one booted foot into the air, slamming down on the worm's soft rose-coloured body, squishing it. As I looked upon the puddle of mass that had been a living creature not two seconds before, I was filled with a sudden remorse.

Christ, I can't go four seconds without maiming something, can I?, I thought to myself as I gingerly brushed the remains of the dead invertebrate away from my body. I stretched both arms to the sky, causing my shoulder to produce a loud snapping sound. "Ooh." I mumbled as my joints clicked about inside my flesh.

A soft but somehow satisfying ache filled my torso, instilling a sudden drowsiness into my psyche. I reached behind me, feeling for my small backpack. I grabbed it off my shoulders and opened it, fishing about inside as quietly as I could. My hand struck a crisp object, its edge slicing me.

"Fuck!" I cursed under my breath as my hand retreated. I inspected my cut finger, a small slit in my fingerprint leaking droplets of crimson blood. I reached my uninjured hand back into

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the bag, grabbing my attacker by its cover. My hand came back into the wildly faint moonlight, a worn notebook in its grasp. Setting it down next to me, I plunged my hand once again to the bottom of the backpack, feeling sticky crumbs from an unidentified source as I blindly fumbled for a pen. I grabbed something long and cylindrical, whipping it out and opening my notebook. I flipped past bored doodles and cat's games of Tic-Tac-Toe and eventually reached a blank white page, its bold and electric reflection of the light pleasantly contrasting the blackness around it. I clicked the pen's nib into place as I struck the first line on the paper with thick purple ink.

Seizure October 23, 1996. 20 seconds in length.

I closed my eyes, breathing in the earthly tones around me. I clicked the pen once more, placing it back in the backpack along with my notebook. I turned once more to the safe, typing a string of numbers memorised from endless usage. The safe's mechanics whirled, fighting the mud that encased it. The whirring stopped, and I gripped the rounded metal handle. My fingers sunk into something soft and oily as I pulled, stretching a disgusted grimace across my expression. The safe opened, revealing a remarkably spotless black interior. Two envelopes and a withering cardboard box containing a stack of papers sat inside. I reached into the box, pulling out the piece of paper that sat on top out of the safe. A scrawled message stared back at me, as my eyes nervously skimmed the text.

Went Out. Won't be back for a while DNR. Don't do anything stupid.

'DNR'. Do Not Respond. I found this particularly insulting considering that this whole letter idea was mine to begin with, but nevertheless, I placed the paper back in the box and closed the safe. As I stood, more mud sticking to my knees, a cool gust of wind filled the shed around me. I smiled as I remembered my favourite legend- if wind comes out of nowhere, a ghost is running past you.

My grin faded as I picked up my bag, turning and walking out of the shed. As I clicked the lock on the door back into place, I suddenly felt a small source of heat on my neck. Turning around, I was met with a punch to the face, sending me reeling to the ground.

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I didn't usually walk this far to school, but last night I stayed at a friend's house, adding another mile to my journey. I looked down at my feet, my white Keds striking the ground at a rhythmic pace. I focused on the mild burning in my lungs, the copper taste in my mouth, as I walked up the hill towards PS 9088 Middle School.

Tragic Kingdom had just come out on CD, and Gwen Stefani's trombone-esque voice now blasted into my ears. I reached the plateau of the hill, the ground evening out. I walked past a long chain link fence, past all the parents in the drop off lane that were late to work. I reached the gate, passing a group of girls on my way in.

"Hey. I like your shoes." One of them said, turning to me. This was met with a flurry of laughter from her group.

"Oh, thanks." I said, not looking up.

"Hey, Lucy!" A voice called out.

As I looked up from my satisfyingly pristine white shoes, I waved to the voice. My friend Jeremy, the only male in school who wasn't a retard that actually talked to me.

"Hey, man!" I called out, smiling.

As I reached him, I noticed he was holding something in his hand, clutching it as if it were keeping him alive.

"What's that?" I said, nodding towards the item.

"Oh, it's homework." He said, quickly stuffing it into his jacket pocket. We walked together, filling the air with mindless chatter

about school, our brothers, and our nonexistent plans for the weekend.

"You gonna go see *Scream* this Saturday?" He prompted, his eyes suddenly lighting up.

"I dunno. I gotta see how much I have saved." I replied, glancing at him.

"Alright, well, keep me posted! See ya later." He said, walking away.

"Yeah, okay."

The school bell, louder than the end of the world, rang throughout the hallways. I looked up and suddenly realised I was the only one still outside.

"Shit." I said under my breath as I broke into a sprint.

I reached room 56B and, wheezing and panting, opened the door.

Mr. Walsh, the chemistry teacher that nobody liked, shot me a look as he continued his lecture about how energy is created when atoms split, as if we cared. I slunk to the back of the room, sweaty and embarrassed. I slumped into a seat in the darkest corner of the room, where nobody could see the perspiration glistening on my forehead.

"Well, since Ms. Jacobs has decided to treat us with her presence, I suppose it would only be fair to hear why she was so fashionably late." He said, seeming to notice my attempt to be inconspicuous. I stood, hoping nobody would see me doing so. To my dismay, every pair of eyes in the room turned to stare at my latest humiliation. A few chuckles echoed about the room as I shifted my weight from

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foot to foot, trying desperately to think of something "Well, uh, I started walking to school late. I stayed at a friend's house, and uh-" "You? Somebody actually had you over?" I heard from somewhere in the room, as a few held back laughter.

"Well, yeah." I said, trying to deflect the insult.

"That is not an acceptable excuse. You need to be more responsible." Mr. Walsh said.

"I'm sorry." I said, looking at my feet.

"Don't be sorry, be better." He said, turning back to the projection on the wall of a clustered atom.

"Ooooh." I heard the boys unanimously say, laughing.

I sat down, scribbling on my paper, trying to keep up with the lesson.

Three

I got home at four. As I walked in, kicking off my shoes, I smelled garlic sauce from the kitchen.

"Mom, I'm here." I said, rushing to get upstairs before she could come over fast enough to talk to me.

"Hey! How was your day?" She said, poking her head out of the door frame.

"Fine." I said, walking quickly upstairs. I opened the door to my room, noticing that my rug had migrated to the corner of the room, and the floor was freshly vacuumed. I ducked underneath my bed, grabbing my Gameboy from its hidden pouch in the slats. As its small LCD screen loaded, I flopped onto my beanbag chair, the sunlight filtering through my thin gauze-like curtains. It was almost golden hour, the sun becoming a tangerine shade as it dipped below the horizon. My fingers flew about the small device's controls, jumping over cubes and shooting fireballs at turtles with the click of a button. As I played, I thought of Jeremy. The way he was one of the only opposite-sex friends that I had, even if I could tell that he wanted to be more.

I felt a twinge of hunger in my stomach, but I didn't want to go downstairs, knowing that my mother would be waiting to ramble about my estranged father's latest escapades. The sun had set relatively quickly, darkness setting in. I stood, cracking my back and stretching up towards the roof. I walked over to my dresser, opening the middle drawer and retrieving a small pouch containing fifteen dollars I had saved from last year. I took a crumpled five dollar bill

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out of the pouch and walked downstairs as quietly as I could. I walked out the door, shutting it carefully. I could hear my mother humming as I left, and a touch of guilt filled my chest before I walked down the porch stairs and down the sidewalk.

The night was warm, warmer than I was used to. It was slightly unsettling, being alone on a night like this. The moon struck the sidewalk in front of me, illuminating my path. After several miles, I reached the drug store and walked inside. The air conditioning was uncomfortably cold against the bare skin of my arms. The fluorescent lights hurt my eyes. I grabbed a bag of gummy worms off the shelf after a bit of consideration. I paid for the gummies with my meagre five dollars, leaving the store. As I stood in the parking lot, a figure came into view. I wasn't able to see his face well, but I could tell he was wearing some sort of white mask-the moonlight glinted off of the shiny acrylic coating on it. He looked back at me, unmoving. Unsettled, I began to walk hurriedly away.

I noticed, in the corner of my eye, that the stranger's head turned towards me as I moved farther away from him. The eyes of the mask, dead, yet somehow still alive with insanity, stared at me from afar, boring two holes in the back of my head. I turned, walking swiftly along the sidewalk. I noticed that the watching feeling didn't go away, even after I was far from him. I turned around, and was met with a man, wearing a porcelain baby doll mask, standing about five feet away. I screamed quite viscerally, a surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins at an inhuman speed. I began to bolt down the sidewalk, my feet hitting the cracking

pavement at an astonishing rate. I couldn't hear the man behind me anymore, but somehow I knew he was still there, as if my fear were a sonar of sorts.

Hot tears streamed down my face, being blown about my lower face as I sprinted. I became even more scared as I realised I was several miles from my home, that I'd never make it all the way there on foot while running this fast. I continued to book it down the street, passing houses, their windows dark for the night. I began to consider jumping the gate into someone's yard, but the thought was extinguished as I passed a fence with a sign reading "Beware Of Dog". I continued running, turning random corners, getting farther away from my house by the minute. I reached a small cul-de-sac, illuminated by streetlights casting their yellow haze upon the American dream-style homes below.

I sat, panting, on the curb. I looked around, inspecting each house thoroughly, confirming that there was nowhere I could go without my mother being informed of my departure. I looked down towards where the cul-de-sac narrowed, leading to the main road. I kept my eyes there, until I heard the intense rap of running feet behind me. I barely had time to turn before two large hands encased my head. A gruff, masculine voice, whispered something into my ear. It reminded me of a romanticised Dutch, in a strange way. The man suddenly loosened his grip, and as my awareness heightened following the initial shock, I began to struggle against him with futile attempts to escape, but his fingers tightened around my face,

leaving me essentially immobilised. I began to scream, shrieking for help as loudly as I could.

A light in one of the houses turned on, prompting me to scream louder. The man dragged me backwards with unprecedented speed, yanking me into a bush behind one of the houses. His hands readjusted so they covered my mouth in such a way that no audible sound could be produced.

"Do that again, and this will hurt more than it needs to." He mumbled into my ear.

I heard a soft tinkling, as if two champagne glasses were shaking about a table. Suddenly, the man went silent as the door of the now awake family's house opened, revealing a concerned-looking mother, accompanied by her husband. I tried once more to yell. As I opened my mouth, my tongue slid across the man's hand. I screamed again, ignoring the pungent taste of dirt and Skoal that now filled my throat. A sharp pain struck my neck. I lifted my hand to the source of the pain, feeling a glass tube that the man held. I began to scream as I realised it was a needle. The man's grip tightened, nearly strangling me. My vision began to darken with black spots as my brain was denied oxygen. I felt my voice fade out of earshot as I closed my eyes to meet my fate.

Four

I awoke in a room painted an absolutely hideous shade of yellow. My head spun, making me nauseous and drowsy. I shut my eyes, the world spinning about me like the drum of a washing machine. I opened my eyes, and, suddenly feeling the urge to do so, extended my neck and opened my mouth, releasing a torrent of light orange vomit onto the floor.

"Ugh." I muttered, looking upon the contents of my stomach.

"Hello there. You've been away from us for quite a while now." A voice said from beyond.

"Hello?" I shouted into the void, not even caring about how utterly insane I must have looked, covered in puke and screaming at nothing.

"Good morning." The voice replied. It was sickly sweet, but male.

"Where is this?" I said, upon realising there were no doors or windows in the room.

"Heaven." The voice replied

"I don't know what you want, okay? Please, just stop with these games and let me go." I pleaded with the blank yellow wall.

"Why would you ever want to leave this place? It's paradise!" The voice said with a chuckle.

"Besides, you can't go back to tell about the afterlife, silly." It added with a chuckle.

"No. You listen to me. I did nothing to you, you hear me? Nothing. There is no reason I should be dealing with this right now. I'm going to escape, and call the cops. You won't get away with this."

"Dearest, I am God. There is no earthly authority system that can deny my wishes."

"Look, I don't pretend to know if you're crazy, or sick, or whatever the fuck you have to be to pull shit like this on unsuspecting people, but this game you've set up for yourself won't last."

"The wind of time blows forever, and stops for no one, my child."

The voice added.

I ignored it, standing up and walking towards the wall ahead of me. I lifted one foot, which I noticed was bare, and thrust it as hard as I could towards the yellow-painted plaster. The ball of my foot struck the wall with amazing force, sending a shot of pain through my body. I disregarded the violent, shooting pain that now filled my body, kicking it again. I continued to kick my foot into the wall, eventually adding the help of my fists. After more than three minutes of bashing, I had kicked through to the other side. A faint beam of light entered the room. I put my mouth to the hole, shouting as loudly as I could.

"Hey! Dipshits!" I screeched.

"You had better stop whatever this bullshit is right now! My dad is a cop, and he'll break your spine!" I shouted.

"Easy, child." The voice soothed.

"You wouldn't want to put out that fire in your belly before the big day."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

"You see," The voice continued, disregarding my question.

"We have been watching you for quite some time now. We know that you're unhappy. This is our gift to you. Endless joy- no bullies, no parents, no school. This is your earthly purgatory, Lucy." The voice explained.

"How do you know my name? Did you bug my house?" I said, frightened by my own words.

The voice chuckled. I turned back to my wall, ripping away at the plaster with my fingers. My fingernails bent backwards, tearing my cuticles and sending drops of blood spattering across the wall as I tore at the wooden frame like a wild animal. Eventually, the hole was big enough for my head to fit through. I forced my head through the hole, contorting my neck uncomfortably as I did so. I saw a long hallway, a door at each end. One door was black- there was a small sign that read "Enlightenment Studio". On the other end, a blank purple door. The door to the Enlightenment Studio opened slightly, revealing yet another creepy man wearing a porcelain baby doll mask. I jerked my head back through the hole, the wood scraping the skin off the back of my neck.

I fell back, landing hard. I sat up, realising my hair was now wet with blood. The man with the mask dipped down gently, lining up his face with the hole.

"Please do not damage your home, dearest." He said.

From his voice, I could tell it was not the same man who had brought me here. He stood upright, and I could see he was holding an axe. He reared back, striking the wall and sending a cloud of dust

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at my face. My eyes filled with tears as the grainy debris made its way into my sinuses. The hole widened.

"Come with me." He said, extending a black gloved hand through the hole. Seeing no other option, I stood, brushing the wood chips off myself, and gingerly stepped through the hole.

Five

We walked down the hallway towards the purple door. The air smelled strangely of grape popsicles and new cars. The man in the mask did not speak to me. He opened the door for me, motioning me inside. I stepped into the surprisingly inviting room, and he closed the door behind me.

"Hello again, dearest child." The voice echoed about the walls.

"What is this? What are you doing now?" I shouted into the air.

"This is about you. Your happiness. Do not waste your mental strength on me." The voice responded solemnly.

I suddenly felt chilled, as if the air conditioning suddenly dropped twenty degrees. I looked around the room, which was shockingly bright for a room in the house of an absolute crackhead. Beanbags and boxy colourful chairs adorned the tile floor. A bookshelf, filled with untitled children's books in solid colours, caught my attention. I approached it, selecting a vibrant red cardboard book. Its cover was blank on both sides, and there was no information about the publisher. I skimmed through the thirty-something pages, and I recognized the book to be 'Put Me In The Zoo!', but the text was covered by black permanent marker, leaving only out of context images.

"What happened to all this stuff?" I said out loud to myself as I chose another book from the shelf.

Glancing through it, I found this one to be completely blacked out except for one image of a cartoon cat exclaiming "Be Safe!".

"We find human experiences distracting, which is what inspired us to create our sanctuary. You are only as human as you are capable of believing you are. If you surround yourself with manifestation of the divine resting place, does it truly matter where you do so?" The voice explained.

"The hard work is done. It is up to you to take the final step through the door of eternal bliss, dearest Lucy. The rest is up to you." It continued.

"So I'm trapped here?" I shouted.

"If you believe you are." The voice stated solemnly.

I walked over to the purple door, trying the knob. To my surprise, it was unlocked. I walked cautiously through the doorway and down the hall towards the Enlightenment Studio. I tried the door, but it was locked. I noticed a second corridor that extended to the left of the Enlightenment Studio, which I moved through slowly. Six doors, three on each side, decorated the wall of the hallway. On the left, green, blue, and orange. On the right, yellow, red, and pink. The doors were blank, leaving me to wonder whether they were simply replicas of the purple room. I reached the end of the hallway, and I turned to my left, trying the blue door, which opened fluidly. Inside, a small chandelier hung from the ceiling, dimly lighting the navy blue walls.

Across the blue room was a second door- white. I walked across the carpeted floor, my bare feet padding slowly. The white door opened to a long, narrow hallway. It looked like that of a mine shaft, with its walls being made of dirt. Lamps clung to wires

attached to wooden framing. A dirty, earthy smell filled my nose- it reminded me of the woods after a long rain. Eventually, the dirt hall led to a set of stairs, wooden and unfinished. As I climbed, I felt a sharp splint of oak slide under the skin of my foot.

"Jesus." I mumbled, lifting my foot to inspect the damage.

A large wood shaving protruded from the thin layer of callus on my big toe. I tugged on the end of the splint with my index finger, and the wood slid out of my skin with some persistence. I continued up the stairway, reaching a plain wooden door. I tried the handle, but it didn't move. I pushed my weight against the door, and as I did so I felt the wood give slightly, I moved my torso back, preparing to strike it again with my shoulder. I slammed into the door, the hinges breaking off the frame and the door hanging unnaturally against the wall. I pushed past it, moving through the frame.

As I continued, I saw a large room ahead of me, painted a light shade of mahogany. Sunlight poured in from a large window above me. I moved ahead through the mahogany room, approaching a door on the other end. I opened the door, and was surprised to find myself standing, barefoot, on the soft moss floor of a forest.

The warm sun sent goosebumps up my arms, and my eyes watered, not yet adjusted to the brightness. The light filtered through the thick evergreen branches above me, and everything smelled of Christmas. Overwhelmed, I quickly sat on the soft lichen beneath me, breathing rapidly.

I shifted my gaze about my surroundings, amazed that such a complex structure could be hidden so well. I turned around,

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admiring the hellish maze I had just escaped. A small wooden cabin sat, ivy growing on its somewhat rotted side panels. I stood, walking backwards. My toes sunk quietly into the algae as I stepped. I turned around, suddenly stuck by the reality of the situation. I began to walk briskly away from the cabin, towards the edge of the forest. I could tell it was probably late afternoon, judging from the sun's position in the bright blue sky above me. I grimaced in pain as my middle toe struck an above ground root, pushing the nail backwards. I hopped over piles of leaves and berries from the trees above me, trying not to think about the sheer ounces of sap sticking to the skin of my feet.

Six

After about forty five minutes, I reached a cliff. I stood on the edge, cold wind hitting my face. My body filled with a cool chill as I realised I was quite inappropriately dressed for the weather. A plain blue short sleeved shirt and blue cotton shorts clung to my body, fused to my skin from sweat. My clothes and shoes were nowhere to be found, and I noticed that my once-painted nails had been wiped of all polish and trimmed. I watched as blood steadily poured from my nail beds, grateful that the shock hadn't worn off enough for me to feel it. I looked below at the twenty-some foot drop. Trees dotted the forest floor, and small green vines filled the crevices of the massive rock wall. I strained my eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of what lay beyond the woods.

Cubist shapes registered in my mind, but I was unable to focus on the details. As I stared, my foot slipped over a loose rock on the cliff's edge, generating a horrified gasp from me as I stumbled ever closer to the edge. Thankfully, the friction of my foot against the brittle rock slowed me before I went careening into the trees below. My heart raced as I tried to catch my breath.

"Hey." I heard from behind me.

I screamed as I turned around. A boy, his raven black hair tossed about his rounded face, stared back at me. He sported the same boring attire as I, though his was green.

"Are you comin' from 'God's' house?" He said, throwing up air quotes around 'God'.

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"Yeah.... Is my neck bleeding?" I asked, lifting my hair. "Ooh. That might need stitches." he said as he inspected my wound.

"Fuck." I muttered as I placed my hair back over the exposed flesh.

"I'm Lucy" I said, extending one blood-saturated palm.

"I'm good, thanks. I'm Jack." He said, looking at my hand.

"Whatever. How do we get down there?" I said, nodding towards the drop-off behind me.

"Uh. I'm not sure. Maybe there's a less steep incline over here somewhere." He suggested, starting towards the edge of the cliff.

"Be careful, I almost just busted my ass getting too close," I said as he approached the edge of the cliff.

"Sucks no be you." He said, smiling.

"Hey! Why'd you get to keep your shoes?" I demanded as I admired his worn sneakers

"I dunno. Isn't it hilarious that they just let us leave? Thanks for breaking that last door, by the way."

"You followed me out?" I asked, surprised.

"Well, yeah. I heard you screaming at them, and then my door was just... open."

"What room were you in?"

"Uh. yellow, I think. Yeah."

"My room didn't have a door to it." I said, laughing through the fear I felt as I realised I wasn't sure how I had gotten in in the first place.

"What the fuck?" He said, smiling.

"I know, right? I had to break through the wall!" I said. Jack let out a shrill laugh as I said this. He inspected the cliff closely, admiring the foliage below.

"So, did they kidnap you too?" I asked, feeling the tender spot on my neck where the man had forced a needle.

"Yeah. They stabbed me with a little knife thingy." He said.

"You mean a needle?"

"Yeah."

We both fell silent for a moment, taking in the sheer insanity of our present situation.

"Did they know your name?" He asked, looking at me.

I nodded, looking at the plant life that now decorated my sap-covered feet.

"Does that mean they were watching us, somehow? That this wasn't random?"

"I... I don't know." I said, suddenly afraid.

"We should go." He said, walking quickly along the edge of the cliff.

"Wait!" I shouted.

He ignored me, maintaining his pace.

"Come on! I think I found a way!" He yelled.

I trotted over to where he stood, looking at a rocky decline down the cliff's face.

"We shouldn't do this." I said, looking at the loose pebbles that littered the slope.

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"Would you rather go back there?" He said, motioning towards the cabin.

"No...." I admitted. "Okay, then it's settled." He said, starting down the cliff.

End Of Excerpt

Kilby Period

Quasar Queso

The stars were yellow and pink as The Publius flew between them. Its fuel, a purple fluid derived from the arousal of a specific type of squid, streaked behind it. Ulysses Monrouke took on the piloting- he was a strange man, extremely tall. He'd never really cared for the Publius, but as a rental ship, it did its job.

"Squib? Tighten the fuel stomata, would you? We don't have much left and it's being used too quickly."

"Mmn." Squib muttered, hopping from his tanning bed on the far end of the ship. Squib was an even stranger specimen than Ulysses Monrouke- he was small and yellow, with a white stripe down his centre. His body was coated in a thick layer of dense fur that slightly softened his deep black eyes. His physique was vaguely reminiscent of a hamster (not considering his foot-long legs). The sound of Ulysses Monrouke turning the ship's wheel briefly covered the clicking of Squib's extremely long toes.

"Squib, can you get on that please?"

"*Mmn!*"

"Thank you, Squib. I appreciate it," Ulysses Monrouke said as Squib's tentacle-hands flew about the console on the wall of the ship that controlled the fuel release gauge.

"Mmn." Squib responded, placing his eye-protective goggles back onto his face and relaxing into the light of his tanning bed.

“I don’t understand how you can stand that damned thing, Squib.

You haven’t got any visible skin anyway, what’s the point?”

“Mmn.”

“Ah. I see.” Ulysses Monrouke said as they passed a massive orange planet. It appeared to be composed entirely of liquid, almost like juice. Blobs of the substance fell from its main mass as gravity tugged at it.

“What do you think of this one, Squib?”

“Mmn.”

“Alright, alright. I didn’t realise you felt so strongly about it,”

Ulysses Monrouke said as the Publius jetted past the juice-planet.

“What is this, what is it- cheese?- you’re so bent on having, Squib?

There’s plenty of brie on that stupid little Earth planet. We could set down in front of some poor farmer they’ll never believe- we could watch that show you like so much- TLC, I believe it’s called. What do you think about that, Squib?”

“Mmn.”

“Then I’ll assume you’re fronting me what it’ll cost to break the atmosphere of *three planets*, then, Squib. We’ve covered half the fucking solar system looking for this cheese you want so badly.”

“Mmn.”

“You know, Squib, sometimes I wonder if you even listen to me.”

“Mmn.”

“If you care about the friendship so much, we’d do something *I* like every now and again.”

“Mmn!”

“This one?” Ulysses Monrouke asked as they approached a large brown planet, apparently made entirely of rock and metal.

“Mmn.” Squib said as he leapt down from his tanning bed and placed his goggles on the floor next to it.

“Well, get ready then! I’m not going to sit around and wait for you to do your fur this time.”

“Mmn. Mmn.” Squib mumbled as he began to root through a drawer on the wall of the ship. Producing a purple hairbrush from it, he began to delicately comb his fur into circular patterns.

“There’s no need to be so fancy, Squib.”

“*Mmn.*”

“I didn’t say you didn’t look *good*, Squib. Jesus.” Ulysses Monrouke said, rolling his eyes as the Publius began to descend to the metal planet. Squib, putting the final touches on his hairstyle, grabbed his favourite sunglasses and his respirator suit, putting them on quickly. His claw-like toes clicked and clacked against the material.

“Mmn.” Squib said as he zipped the obnoxiously long legs of his suit.

“We’ve been over this, Squib. I don’t need respiration for every planet.”

Squib shifted about uncomfortably in the suit, using his tentacles to rearrange parts that fit him poorly.

“MMN,” Squib said.

“It isn’t anyone’s fault that you breathe through your damn fur, Squib. If you don’t like it, have it removed,” Ulysses Monrouke said as Squib placed his helmet on his head. It was a sparkly object,

almost like a transparent disco ball. A purple box stuck to the front of it. Squib reached his tentacle to the box, double-tapping the right side of it.

“Alright, Squib. Let’s get this over with.” Ulysses Monrouke said.

“Go to hell.” The purple box said over Squib’s ‘mmn’.

“If you’re not careful I’ll throw that stupid thing into the garbage disposal.”

“Go to hell.” The purple box said again.

Ulysses Monrouke and Squib walked to the door of the ship as Squib extended one yellow tentacle to the control panel next to it. It clicked a few buttons, prompting the panel to turn a light purple in colour. The door opened and Squib immediately bounced outside.

“Squib, wait a second.” Ulysses Monrouke said as Squib flipped through the air.

Ulysses Monrouke noticed a man standing at a booth. Although he appeared to be the only one on the planet, not to mention his extremely suspicious demeanour, Squib was leaping towards him as fast as his weird bodily proportions would allow. Ulysses Monrouke followed Squib as he came to a stop in front of the man’s booth.

‘*Quasar Queso- One Pc. Wisdom & 2 Mints*’, a sign above the booth read.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Ulysses Monrouke said to himself as Squib began to speak to the man.

“Hello, friend.” The man said.

“Cowboys with horses named Friday leave town faster.” Squib’s purple box crackled.

“And the mints?”

Squib nodded his head inside the helmet and, reaching his tentacle into his suit pocket, pulled out a can of white pellets. He handed it to the man, who counted two out of the batch.

“Thank you. Here is your cheese,” the man said, handing Squib a large paper-wrapped package. Squib eagerly accepted the parcel and bounded happily back into the ship.

“I’m Ulysses Monrouke.” Ulysses Monrouke said to the man, attempting to cut the awkward tension that now hung between them as they stood on the barren planet.

“I don’t give a fuck,” the man said.

Unsure of the proper response, Ulysses Monrouke turned slowly and followed Squib back into the ship. Squib had already removed his suit and was sitting happily in the front seat, taking large bites of the white block of cheese.

“That’s all we came for?”

“Mmmph.” Squib said, his mouth filled with cheese.

“I can’t understand you, Squib.”

Squib reached under his seat, retrieving the purple box. His tentacle held it by his face.

“Make soup. Cheese. Make soup.” The box croaked.

“We don’t have any broth, Squib.”

“Go find? For soup?” The box asked.

Ulysses sighed and sat in the driver’s seat.

“I have things to do, Squib. Make it quick.”

“Make soup! Cheese!” The box exclaimed.

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Ulysses rubbed his temples as he started the Publius and they left the metal planet.

“Cheese! Soup! Cowboy!” The box said.

The Danny Poem- Too Weird To Pass Up

White Blood

White Eyes

Black Hair

Black Skin

Danny

This is a bit out of place, isn't it? I was falling asleep a couple nights ago, and as I was in that weird half-asleep twilight stage, I had a weird dream about a man singing about a guy named Danny over and over again. Sometimes I worry myself.

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Ethel Fields

Can you smell the gasoline?

Can you feel the cold?

Can you see the smoke?

Red Period

This should be interesting. If you know me well, you'll know that I love a good essay. I am a Wikipedia editor in my free time, and I would consider myself a proud sheriff of the grammar police. I have written pages upon pages of non-fiction in my lifetime, which is partially the reason I've decided to dabble in fiction lately. I don't find time to research and write essays as much as I used to, sadly. Much of my essays are conversational, which I think is better to read. A lot of it contains opinionated content, so be warned. I will include facts and works cited for statistics and information, but I like to yap.

I wanted to dedicate this portion of the book to my non-fiction work and general fondness of data and information. Here is the Red Period.

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There Is No God

An essay by Jane Kistner

Pen. 16th of November

Oh man. I can already *hear* the arguments playing out in my head. This is going to piss a lot of people off, (if that's you, there's no shame in skipping this) but I feel like it should be said. If you know me well, you might know that I was a child of Jesus for the better part of seven years. I was baptised Episcopalian as a baby, and though I am told the pastor tried to feed me wine, I am thankful for it. In past works, I've admitted to 'detesting' the religious part of my life, but I feel differently about it now.

I was a very scientific child. I was very factual and quite serious for my age, which was undoubtedly annoying as *shit* to everyone else. Although I would eventually go down the path opposite to science, I was very interested in the beginnings of the universe as a kid. I received a National Geographic magazine subscription as a present some time after my ninth birthday. At this point, we were no longer attending church, but I vaguely remember praying on occasion at this age. This specific magazine was a deep dive on the Big Bang Theory, which directly contradicts the teachings of the church.

According to the Bible, God created the world (and, I assume, the universe) in six days. Christians, and branches thereof, believe that God is the creator and orchestrator of all life and matter. The Big Bang Theory suggests that, billions of years ago, there was

a very hot, very dense, spot of mass in an empty void. This is called 'the singularity'. Eventually, it became too hot and exploded, beginning the creation of the universe. This theory runs based on scientific evidence and $H = 1/R (dR/dt)$, the equation that states the universe expands at a constant and continuous rate (not to be nerdy, I just enjoy data).

I remember reading this and getting confused- this would mean that God didn't create the universe, and maybe that God didn't *exist*. It should be noted that, as a young child, I did not quite grasp the concept of Jesus or God in the first place. My family attended church every Sunday- some of my earliest memories are of annotating a Bible in my preschool class. We were technically raised with a Christian-esque lifestyle in mind, but we were never directly told that other religions were incorrect. I was well educated- I was taught about evolution and the dinosaurs. My family didn't pray before we ate. However, I was quite small when all of this was happening- old enough to understand what I was being taught, but still far too young to develop my own opinions. I assumed that if an adult said it, it must be true.

For the first time in my very young life, something contradicted someone older than me- that intrigued me, I guess. As I got older and more interested in science, I gradually stopped praying. I briefly went through a phase where I skimmed the Bible to try and revive my faith, but other than that, I didn't believe in God anymore. "I don't believe in God," I would say. "Have fun in

Hell,” the Christian religion said back. Thankfully, my parents couldn’t have given less of a damn what I did or did not believe.

I was extremely lucky to grow up in a home where I was allowed opinions that differed from my parents, but lots of other people had an issue with atheism. This was my first real experience with conflict (outside of politics, that’s a whole other thing), and I quickly realised ‘*Oh, I shouldn’t talk about religion with other people.*’ It’s not that *every* person will respond poorly to a different opinion than theirs, it’s that *some* people will. Unfortunately, it is hard to identify that type of person until you are shouting at each other.

As I grew up and was able to engage in conversation in ways I hadn’t before, I also realised that many of the people in my life were Christian. Very, very Christian. Now, I’d like to add that there isn’t anything wrong with being religious in any sense. It’s your life, I really don’t care what you do as long as it isn’t hurting me or anyone else. Problems arise when people fight over religion, though. Sadly, there are people in my life who, to this day, try to convince me that someday I’ll awake in the light of God or whatever. For the record, I’d like to make it clear that *it’s not going to happen*. Stop waiting for the day that I change my mind, because it isn’t going to come. I am confident in my decision, and I’m not going to go back on it. Please, for my sanity, *stop asking me to go to church*.

Despite the unavoidable conflict and unskippable side quests thrust upon me due to my religious beliefs, I do find religion

interesting- namely, the trust people put in God. I know people who take major, life altering risks, and they justify it by saying: ‘My angels are with me’. In times of war or shooting, people drop to the ground to pray. I respect that kind of faith, but it also slightly scares me- I mean, how can *billions of people* possibly believe that an angel, described by Isaiah 6 as a literal eyeball with wings, will save their life, and yet *an equally massive number of people think skin colour matters?*

Once again, there is no proof of God, angels, or anything along those lines, and there likely never will be. Oh, you saw the face of Jesus burned into your toast? *That isn't evidence, please stop presenting it as if it is.* Aside from dates and historical recollection of Jesus, there will likely never be any solid evidence that anything in the Bible ever occurred. It is, by definition, a matter of faith. Either you believe it, or you don't. It's all very strange to me.

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Neurodivergence and The Internet: Shut The Fuck Up, For God's Sake.

A rant by Jane Kistner

Pen. 19 November

There is nothing- *nothing*- that annoys me more than an attention seeker. By definition, an attention seeker is someone who goes out of their way to elicit some kind of shock value to try and get someone to notice them or bring themselves to the centre of attention. If you are one of those people and I happen to catch you, I won't call you out- but we cannot be friends. I will actively make the decision to shut down every advance towards companionship you make towards me, because if nobody's had the balls to tell you yet- you are *annoying*. Yes, you. You know who you are. I see you.

Now, before I delve into the fresh hell these people spawn from, I would like to make it clear that being funny and attention seeking are two very different things. Trying to engage in a conversation is not attention seeking, by any means. Interaction is not always done with attention in mind. I'm referring to *those people*. People who are obnoxiously loud, people who make racism their entire personality, people who 'one-up'. Those people. If you're reading this and think to yourself, '*Gee whiz, that sounds an awful lot like me*', let me give you some life-changing advice.

Shut the fuck up. Yes, you. Shut your mouth. You're not funny, you're not cute. You're annoying. You are a *mood killer*. Shut. The. Fuck. Up.

“But Jane, that’s so mean!” You might say. I know it’s mean, but attention-seekers *deserve to be told they are attention-seekers*. If you don’t want to be charged, don’t commit the damn crime, which brings me to my next point. YOU CAN CONTROL IT- STOP PRETENDING LIKE YOU CAN’T. Oh my God- I have been *itching* to say (or, I guess, write) those words for a while now. If you can’t tell, this essay was provoked by a personal experience, or rather, personal *experiences*. Plural. These people are increasing in number, SOMETHING MUST BE DONE.

The particularly annoying thing about these *rats* is that they’ve spread to the holiest site- TikTok. All I wanted was to sit on my ass and scroll through meaningless yip and yap. I don’t wanna *think*. I don’t want to get *mad*. Why do you think I downloaded the damn app in the first place? I came here to *kill* my brain cells, not activate them, for fuck’s sake!

Every now and again, I’ll be lying flat on my back, pure American style, scrolling mindlessly through my for you page, and I’ll come across someone who tries to make an illness a personality trait. As someone who has been forced through the *hell* of an actual learning disability, it isn’t quirky to pretend to have one. Each and every time I have to lock eyes with someone who treats Tourette’s like a hair colour, I have to restrain myself so I don’t end up in federal prison for what I’d like to say.

In real life, people with *real illnesses*, not DID (which is mind-numbingly rare, by the way. I promise you, unless a doctor has said “hey buddy, you have DID”, *you don’t have it*), not

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self-diagnosed autism, not “I took a BuzzFeed quiz and now I have BPD”. Real sickness. Not made-up stuff. It makes me mad, because, as a person who was forced into the special education program, it shouldn’t be made a trend. Now, I am not saying that people who make videos about their struggles are not actually struggling. I’m sure many of them are.

I am, once again, talking about *those people*. The ones who do it for the views. “Why do you care? If you don’t like it, scroll,” you might say. In any other scenario, I would agree with you one hundred percent, but these people are *fueling the stigma*. These people are faking mental illness for attention, which is, first of all, not okay in the slightest sense, online or in person. Besides that, they also distract from people who are actually suffering. They feed into ableism, misinformation, and the like, all of which actively contribute to discrimination against people who are actually sick.

Another thing- this is a hot take, so if you think you could be offended, please feel free to skip over this part- *self-diagnosis is not real*. At least, for some things. If you’re sad consistently and are harbouring suicidal thoughts, yes, you’re likely depressed. If you are constantly scared and overthink everything to the point of exhaustion, yes, you probably have anxiety. Things along those lines are relatively easy to identify. More complex problems, however, such as autism, ADHD, DID, BPD, etc, *should be brought to a medical professional's attention*.

Taking a survey you were advertised on YouTube does not count. Taking a BuzzFeed quiz does not count. I absolutely

understand *suspecting* you may have something- but labelling yourself as having a mental illness or downplaying others who have it because you think you might is *not a good thing to do*. Like I said before, if you have it, that's okay. If you're *thinking* you might have it, that's okay. Saying you have it because you are self-diagnosed is not. *GO SEE A DOCTOR*, and if you can't, *please*, for the love of God, don't try and exploit a real sickness that real people suffer from for views.

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The World Got A Brotha Feelin' Morose

An essay for my sad homeboys by Jane Kistner

Pen. 20 November

Ah, depression. Who doesn't love being so sad you can't walk?

I was depressed for over five years, which feels strange to say. Thankfully, I've been in recovery for over four months now- it feels like a lifetime ago. Even though I am much healthier, the story is still hard to tell. It started out, funnily enough, very normal. As I've mentioned before, I was a very, *very* black-and-white thinker as a kid (I still very much am, but hey, peer pressure is a bitch), so I didn't think much of it when I started to feel a bit off.

I'd also like to add that, at this point in time, I was ten years old. If you think I'm bad now, just imagine me with five years' less experience. Trainwreck, to say the least. I wasn't incredibly comfortable with my life at this age- my mother was in Georgia on a year-long work opportunity, I was struggling with my 'purpose', and I was growing apart from people in my life that I really loved. It was a rough patch, which I think probably gave traction to what was to come.

I was stable until the pandemic happened. We were sent home- I remember laughing and fucking around with my friends about how stupid the whole thing was. "See you in a week!" We said. Oh, poor us. Poor, poor us. It was nobody's fault, really-nobody knew it was coming, no one knew how to prepare.

Rampant disease wasn't a common factor to anyone's life. To be honest, we all saw it like early spring break. I mean, we get to stay home *and* lay on the couch to do school? Say less.

I was fine for a couple of weeks, and then things started to go a bit downhill. I lived in an obnoxiously tiny apartment at this time- it was so small, you couldn't lay flat across me and my sister's bedroom without hitting a wall. We were practically on top of each other trying to participate in second and fourth grade.

After consulting my old diary from this time, I gathered that I moved into a new house in October of the following year. At that point, I had entered the fifth grade and was eleven years old. Still a dumbass, but slightly more aware. As embarrassing as it is to focus on, I also was dealing with puberty and my very poor reception to puberty. I mean, I understood what was happening, but I never stopped to wonder if bedrotting while fighting mood swings was a good idea. (Spoiler alert: It wasn't.)

After a few months, I started to feel a bit sick. I was tired a lot despite not really doing much, and I didn't want to leave my room. I attributed this to puberty. Eventually, it got so bad that I saw black spots when I stood up. I would skip meals for three days, then justify it by eating a bag of chips. I also attributed this to puberty. I started having crying spells, which, as a rare crier, is not normal for me. I remember sitting on my floor in front of my mirror, absolutely numb. In short, I started to become more disconnected, and as a result, sadder. A year went by. As bad as I know it is, I can't name a

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single memory from that year off the top of my head. I remember my daily repetitions:

Wake up
Stay awake
School
Eat
Shower
Scroll
Sleep for two hours
Wake up

A major aspect of this time was my relationship with the internet. Over the years, I have heard many professional opinions on it. Personally, I believe that it was some form of subconscious self harm. I spent a lot of time on the internet. My father, who was the spitting image of me as a child, had set up our internet access to protect us from the more strange aspects of things. I figured out how to bypass this. I didn't want to do it, which is what adds a layer of complexity to the situation. From that point forward, I had full, unrestricted access to the internet. Everything. Porn, gore, violence, graphic descriptions of child abuse and sex trafficking cases, *everything*. I remember seeing things that I didn't understand. It was this awful, sickening gut feeling that, even though I had no idea what I was looking at, it was incredibly wrong.

In the eight-ish months before it was over, I had witnessed multiple acts of murder and dismemberment, stumbled across what

may have possibly been an actual rape, and accidentally accessed multiple extremely disturbing gore websites. I was ten. When this happened, I didn't really understand that things you see can affect you. Today, as a fifteen year old, it's been real fun ridding myself of trauma responses. I'm fine now, but, on the downside, I am completely and totally desensitised. I feel nothing when it comes to sex, drugs, violence, whatever. It isn't good, but I suppose it's better than continuous distress. Anyway, this obviously contributed heavily to my depression.

Honestly, it just goes to show that I really wasn't ready to be left to my own devices. I thought this was a normal routine for a person of my age, and I truly believed that, as long as I was conscious and alive, I was healthy. Another year went by. I decided to stay home for the sixth grade and learn at my own pace- one of the worst ideas I've ever had. I somehow passed sixth grade. Seventh grade started, and I realised that I would be eaten alive by my peers. I was eaten alive by my peers, and then eighth grade began.

At this point, I was heavily traumatised- my sexual assaulter had stepped in front of a train the year before, I was dealing with suicidal ideation, the whole megillah. I was also still extremely depressed, but in denial. "I've recovered!" I wrote in my journal. Ooookay, bud. Whatever you say.

As you can imagine, the whole 'situation' got significantly worse. In March of 2024, my house was discovered to be contaminated with a rather toxic species of mould. A special thank

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you to my asshole landlord, by the way. We were displaced from our home for a couple of weeks, at which point I proceeded to contract a lung disease from the mould exposure. I was literally coughing up blood every time I laughed, which was terrifying. I had started a video diary in April of that year and, around this time, remembered it existed. I began filming myself as I routinely had to monitor my oxygen levels and make sure my mouth wasn't full of blood.

As sad as it is, I can hardly stand to watch the videos. In a lot of them, my eyes are dark and I speak in a very tired voice. I've done my best to erase the memory from my head, but I was miserable. Then, in May, I decided to make a wildly strong cocktail (three parts pure tequila, one part Diet Coke) at two in the morning. To my surprise, I got drunk, and passed out watching Young Sheldon. Thankfully, my situation doesn't qualify as alcoholism, but I mean, I was popping tequila shots on the floor of my kitchen. It wasn't ideal.

I cut myself twice but was dissuaded from doing it again when I accidentally cut my thigh very deep. There is still a scar where it happened, which will likely be there for the rest of my life. Wonderful. I was nearly institutionalised. In July, I had my birthday. I went out with my cousins and it was very fun. Then, I started school, and just like that, it was over.

What really hurts is that I don't remember a lot of what happened. I remember feeling sick all the time, but my mind has literally cut parts of my life from my memory. I hardly remember my sixth grade year, which is obviously not a good sign. All of this

happened because I refused to seek help. I was quite clearly sick, as we've established. There was absolutely no reason why I shouldn't have called somebody, but I didn't until the fifth grade. I recently told this story to somebody, and they asked, "If you called someone, why didn't you get better?" It's a valid question that I don't think I've answered yet. I didn't get better for a number of reasons, namely, I apparently believed that mental health workers were skilled in the art of sorcery.

I called 988, which is the national suicide hotline for the United States. I spoke to a woman, and after I hung up, I felt exactly the same. "*Well, 988 doesn't work,*" I thought to myself. "*I guess I'm just destined to feel this way.*" God, I wish I was joking. Obviously, 988 does help people, but they can't really help much if you don't give them something to help with. The reason it didn't help me was because I was drier than the Sahara with the woman who picked up. "Hello, I'm Donna from The Crisis Line, what's going on today?" "Uh- um, my name is.... Ellie. I'm sad." (Yes, I used a fake name. I thought 988 could track me.)

"Mhm, and why are you sad, Ellie?"

"I dunno."

"Well, there must be something going on. Do you still live at home?"

"Uh-huh."

"How is your relationship with your parents?"

"Uh... they get mad at me sometimes."

"That sounds tough. Is that why you called?"

“.....no.”

“Well, what can I help you with?”

“I dunno. I gotta go. Bye.”

I hung up the phone and shut my eyes, waiting for the magic of Donna from 988 to overcome my depression. I sat there, like an idiot, for over a minute. I opened my eyes and looked around. “*Am I healed?*” I wondered. No, dumbass. You are not. I never had the balls to call 988 again. I continued on my mission to recover from depression by myself, and, surprise, I was depressed for five more years. See kids, this is what happens when you smell Sharpies and don’t pay attention in class.

Seriously though, I firmly believe that the reason my depression was able to fester and grow for so long is my inability to accept help. As I write this, I realise that there are probably many more with the same thinking. I hope I’m not the first for most of you, but if I am, let me enlighten you: asking for help doesn’t make you any less independent. To be completely honest, I’m not sure where people get the idea. It’s an illness, you can’t make it go away with the power of friendship. Realistically, people get sick. You can’t unsick. If you’re struggling, please ask for help. Call 988 and have an actual conversation.

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

988

CALL, TEXT OR CHAT



How To Get Over Heartbreak: A Tutorial

I think you can conclude who wrote this.

Pen. 24 November

I've been heartbroken twice, and disappointed a few others. There's been a pretty decent amount of 'romantic' stuff in my life- yet, to this day, I am a single pringle. I'm not complaining. I've rejected anyone to ever come onto me, and most of my attempts were rebuffed, so it isn't really a wonder that I'm not seeing anybody. It seems a bit strange for me to be writing this considering I've heartbroken people myself, but nevertheless.

I rejected this asshole I went to middle school with. He was a Star Wars nerd with a blonde Little Lad haircut, and he spoke in a *fake* (yes, fake, ladies and gentlemen, you read that right) British accent. I also rejected a long-time guy friend of mine who was *also* an asshole (getting the theme yet?). Thankfully, that was it until I ended up turning down another guy friend at the end of eighth grade. There was also another who didn't say anything, but made it quite clear that he was interested, and another who I ended up confronting for sexually harassing me. It's been a ride.

Now, when I turned these absolute *villains* down, I didn't think twice. Oh, you think threatening to beat someone up is impressing me (yes, that actually happened)? Buh-bye. I don't regret it at all- I would rather eat glass. If someone is a freaky deakster, or even if you just don't like them, don't feel obligated to placate them. Breaking someone's heart is better than a one-way ticket to Freak

City. I'm saying this because the next few pages may convince you otherwise.

Heartbreak hurts like a bitch. Let me tell you firsthand, if you've never felt rejection, you're lucky. It hurts for a little bit, but when it does, it hurts *bad*. I didn't really feel heartbreak until I was in the fifth grade, but there were a couple weird times before then. In the third grade, I knew this dude. We'll name this one Ryan. He was really funny and super nice, and my other friends had crushes. This was the recipe for what is sometimes called a 'squish'. I didn't really understand what 'liking someone' meant, so I assumed that if they were of the opposite gender and I mildly enjoyed their presence, I had a crush on them.

Now, I knew Ryan until the eighth grade (he made fun of me for this all through middle school, by the way), and we never really discussed it after it happened. There wasn't any tension between us, really, which further proves my point that there wasn't a crush in the first place. Anyway, I thought I liked him way back in third grade. I didn't know how to go about telling him, and to further complicate things, he told me he was moving to Sweden until fifth grade. The dramatic little kid I was- I broke apart a plastic bead necklace and put the beads into an envelope. "Take one out for each new person you meet in Sweden," I told him. I believe I included a letter of some kind in which I professed to like him. I don't think he understood what that meant, but, I suppose that puts us on even ground.

On the last day of third grade, Ryan and I ran into each

other as we were walking out. We stood there and looked at each other for a couple of seconds like the weirdos we were, and then he lunged at me. My life flashed before my eyes, but, as it turns out, he was trying to dramatically hug me. We hugged for a second and then he let go. “See ya, Jane.” “Bye, Ryan.” I didn’t see him until fifth grade (when he returned), and, when I did, it was something along the lines of: “What was the homework for Tuesday?” Neither of us really cared. I saw Ryan for the very last time on the last day of middle school- we signed each other’s yearbooks. ‘HAGS -James’ I wrote in his. ‘Third grade,’ he wrote in mine. Well played, Ryan.

I fell in love for the first time at a summer camp, embarrassingly. For whatever reason, the people I fall for are usually like me in a different font. They even look like me. Does that make me a narcissist in some strange way? A conversation for a different time, I guess. We’ll name this guy Sam, because that was his actual name. It’s fine, we’ll never see each other again. We met as we were avoiding the weird daycare kids. We started talking, and I realised, ‘*Damn, this guy’s pretty cool.*’ It went downhill from there. I remember he was really good at dancing and playing the kalimba, and looked kind of like a rejected Will Byers. He was pretty cool, if you can’t tell from my riveting description.

We were good friends- we spent a lot of time together, which I don’t think helped things. I told him eventually, and he looked at me and said: “I’m gay.” “Oh.. that’s okay,” I said, as if I wasn’t going to end up crying in the summer camp bathroom for twenty minutes just afterwards. Sam and I split up as friends when

my parents pulled me out of the summer camp. Obviously, I never saw him again. I remember him saying he lived in Pasadena- I better not run into him.

I had crushes on two other guys afterwards- and they were best friends. Neither of them liked me back, and one of them kind of looked like the product of Jack Skellington face-fucking a cheese stick. It was not a great time. Then, after that, I planned (never went through with it- bullet dodged) a date with a guy who turned out to be kind of an ass, and actually went on another date with a guy who hates me for unrelated reasons. The point of all this is, being heartbroken or disappointed when dealing with romantic stuff really sucks. It hurts, and it always will, no matter how many times it happens. Thankfully though, the pain doesn't last.

Now, dear reader, I am not emotionally intelligent. If I get rejected, that shit ain't leaving my mind for a while. I think about things way, way, *way* too much- that much I'll admit. However, I know that, from experience, the best way to numb the pain is to stay strong. Don't contact them, don't try again, don't do anything. Distance yourself as much as you can. It sounds hard, and it is, but it'll be easier on you to remove them from your space. Understand that everyone gets rejected, and it hurts. It sucks, and I'm truly sorry if you happen to have been rejected as you're reading this. It'll pass, I promise. Trust me, though, *don't try again*. There's a reason they're saying no, and that reason probably hasn't gone away since you last asked. As someone who has been there, let me be the first to warn you that it hurts worse the second time.

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Even if you choose not to take my advice, dear reader, please take care of yourself and your feelings. There are villains everywhere nowadays- you can never be too careful.

What Qualifies As A Life Changing Event?

A question by Jane Kistner

Pen. 25 November

I've run through my share of deep conversations. When I was a little kid, I used to appear in my sister's bedroom on Christmas Eve to commence my yearly deep conversation with her. She never really liked them, but I didn't care. "Do you like anyone?" "What's been the best day of your life so far?" "If you had a wish, what would it be?" I was a deep question *fanatic*. I used to spring intensely deep and personal questions on people at random times. Mostly, I was met with dry, passive answers. Sometimes, though, I'd get a response. I think that's the best way to meet someone.

One of the questions I used to ask was: "What changed your life?" I got a variety of answers to this question, most of which I sadly do not remember. As I was reminiscing about this era of my life in which I made people rethink their existences, I began to wonder, what actually qualifies as a 'life changing event'? I can think of a couple of times in my life where nothing in particular happened and my life was still permanently altered, or something major happened and I didn't really react. It goes both ways, but it's probably something to expand on. Anyways.

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Being A Woman: My Greatest Mistake

An essay by Jane Kistner

Pen. 29 November

This one goes out to all those men who say sexism is dead. As a girl - it's very much alive, believe me. Since I was a very little kid, I've had the unfortunate position of experiencing modern sexism firsthand, and I'd like to share my personal views on the matter. I think people imagine sexism as the traditional wife-beating, or "women belong in the kitchen", but sadly, it goes far beyond that. I was familiarised with sexism very early in my life- although it wasn't seen that way by some.

When I was very small, I went to a Bible study 'school'. Adults used to ask me about it- "do you have any boyfriends?" They'd ask. Excited, I would recite an extensive list of all my male friends at school. This would be the beginning of my life as a woman, sadly. Though I'm not handing out demerits to the people who said things like that to me, I do find it mildly inappropriate. First of all, I was a toddler. Three, maybe four years old. Obviously, I wasn't interested in *anybody* yet. I could barely spell my own name. I feel like it portrays children- especially female children- in a strange light when they are viewed in a romantic way, even amongst each other. Why is that normal?

I remember when gender first became a 'thing'. We went to school with this boy- we'll call him Claude. Claude was what some would call *eccentric*. He was very pink-princessy, which made

for a lot of gossip amongst the other kids. “He’s a boy, why’s he wearing pink?” That type of thing. One day, Claude came to school in a full pink dress. She introduced herself as Claudia. We were about six when this happened, and all of us were curious. I remember other kids talking about her behind her back, asking her mother why she was allowed to be a girl.

My parents, thankfully, raised me with a theme of tolerance. I was taught that Claudia was allowed to be whoever she wanted, and that each person was entitled to individuality. Despite this, I was very curious about Claudia. I mean, I treated her like my other friends, but I wondered about her a lot. I’d never really considered gender a factor in my person- I knew what was under my clothes and what was in my head, but I’d never stopped to consider that it played a larger role for others. As I grew up, I watched some of my friends go through gender dysphoria, and, while I supported them as best I could (yes, I believe in using people’s preferred pronouns and name), I never really understood.

I’ve always known I was a girl. I was born a girl, I was raised a girl, and I’ll probably die a girl. That’s completely fine by me. Sadly, there have been times when I wished I wasn’t a girl. I was sexually assaulted in the first grade by a male friend of mine. We were at a playground, just talking. Suddenly, he touched himself, then, if that wasn’t bad enough, he reached out *with the same hand* and touched me. I won’t get into specifics for fear that his name could be found, but he passed away about six years later in a very tragic accident. I made eye contact with his father, who was there

when it happened, at the memorial. Oddly, I felt ashamed. His father was destroyed after his death- rightfully so. He'd lost his son. I can't begin to imagine what losing someone so important is like. But, in a weird way, I felt like I had somehow tainted his memory by being the girl he'd assaulted. *I should go*, I thought. *I have no right to be here*. I didn't feel anger towards him for hurting me- I never really did. Instead, I felt guilty and disgusting for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I know, logically, he's the one who touched *me*. I did nothing wrong, but, to this day, I still harbor deep feelings of guilt whenever he is mentioned. I'd like to add that, while whatever feelings you experience after an assault are valid, you shouldn't think you've done anything wrong. Don't use me as an example of normal values.

Then, in the eighth grade, I was nearly kidnapped on my way to the grocery store. I was wearing a tank top that was rather low-cut- I mean, it was April in southern California. I wasn't wearing a damn parka. As I waited to cross the street, a man in a red car pulled up next to me. He got out of his car and began motioning for me to come over. I was alone on the sidewalk- rushing traffic on both sides of me. I had nowhere to run should this man try to force me into the car, so I just stood there, unsure of how to respond. He continued to make various weird gestures at me, smiling in a way that was so incredibly disconcerting. I didn't know what to do- I mean, if he had come over to me, I would've been completely screwed. I had nowhere to go, no one to help me. He kept going. "I'm not going

over there,” I said. His smile faded a bit.

The light turned green, and I walked away from the guy, amazed that I wasn’t hogtied in his backseat. He’d had the opportune moment- knowing people, he probably would’ve gotten away with it. I made it to the grocery store, and, after walking around aimlessly, trying to wear off the panic, I called the police. In the moment, I hadn’t collected much from his appearance or car tags. I relayed everything I remembered to the police, who never contacted me regarding the situation again. Sadly, the moral of this story was, “guess I better cover up if I want to lower the chances I’ll get harassed”. I’ve had people say that it’s an equal risk no matter what I’m wearing- which I’d like to clarify isn’t true. Obviously, I’m a biological female. I have a chest. Being taught that having female anatomy was a source of risk was quite scary, to be honest. It’s a terrible feeling when you know someone is only interacting with you because they want to touch you. It sucks that my overall safety depends on how much skin I’m showing. I find this to be a main source of sexism in my life- “If you got raped while wearing a crop top, you were asking for it.” Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with you?

I’ve, sadly, had grown men and women comment on my body. While I know it differs from person to person, I’m equally uncomfortable with anybody of any gender putting the focal point on my body. I don’t really care if you’re a woman, a man, whatever. Knowing that, when I spoke to you, your first thought was ‘nice tits’, is *not comforting*. Understand that I’m left to wonder why you

were looking in the first place. There are a few notable instances- recently, I had to confront a guy. I didn't want to- I don't like to dislike people, or vice versa, but this dude was sexually harassing me. At first, it was just weird. He'd pretend to touch himself while looking at me, or he'd get uncomfortably close to me. One day, in class, one of his friends asked him- *in front of me*- if he'd date me. Too bewildered to speak, I watched as he took a good long look at me and said he would. "Oh, but that's flattering!" I'd really like to visit whatever planet you're on someday, dumbass. Touching people or commenting on them in a sexual way when they've made it clear *they don't want you to* is quite literally illegal (not that the justice system will do anything about it, but I'll spare you my thoughts on that). It's not a compliment. Let's put on our thinking caps, people. A guy friend of mine detailed what he'd do to me during oral sex. This happened in algebra. There must've been twenty other people nearby when it happened. I laughed, because frankly, I never know what the fuck to do in these situations. How do you respond to that? It was a friend of mine- I'm not going to just shout at him. Twenty minutes later, we were standing at a whiteboard together, and he said, *into my fucking earlobe*, "back up, I'm hard." Like.... What? *Who does that?* We'd known each other for like a month, too. I didn't bring it up to him or anything- I wound up speaking to one of his close friends about his weird behavior- I'll be honest, I thought he was coming onto me. The friend thought it was funny I'd even have the *notion*. Sorry, when did it become normal to describe how you'd eat me out as we're sitting in math class? To be completely

honest, I doubt I'll ever discuss it out loud- if I'm not believed, that would really suck.

All in all, yeah, sexism is still alive. It's still incredibly common. Women all over the world are oppressed by male-dominated regimes like the Taliban, women are still viewed as dumb by many, women are still raped and not believed. This is real, sadly. I really hope it doesn't last- I'd hate to die in a world where this shit is still an issue.

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A List Of Cool Things

A list by Jane Kistner

Purple clay
Whimsigoth
Clacky
Tangy
Citrus
Red vinyl
Pink grapefruit gummies from trader joe's
Steven Rhodes
Happy Bunny
The cocaine is not good for you
Grunge
Nirvana
Colorful christmas
Nostalgia
Fresh air
Redwood forest
Grape Crush (soda)
Mulch
Rain
Smiling Friends
Jack Stauber
SHOP: A Pop Opera
Potato and leek soup

Scalloped potatoes with cheese
Frosted flakes with cinnamon
Ranch and fries
Tater tots
Kraft mac n cheese
Downtown aesthetic
Butthole surfers
Mazzy star
Cocteau twins
Evelyn Evelyn
The stanley parable
Stardew Valley
Jenny Leclue Detectivu
Garden of earthly delights painting
Indium
Uluru in australia
Shooting star
Cobalt
Cornflower blue
Lucky Charms
Peeing in the shower
Street fighting man
Fantastic mr fox
Fantastic mr fox font
October
November

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December

Conic and globose strawberries

Solvang

Butternia sp. (late triassic)

Diplocaulus magnicornis

Temnospondyls

Lepospondyls

Have You Ever Seen Something, But Nobody Believes You?

A self-answered question by Jane Kistner

Pen. 2 December

This is a *fantastic* conversation starter. Some people see this as more of a paranormal type of question, but others are different. I've heard some pretty cool stories from people, but, as I've recently realised, my personal stories would make for good writing. I've seen some pretty odd things in my lifetime, but, thankfully, I am generally believed by the people I tell stories to.

Off the top of my head, I can remember three or four different things- the first being the weird orb in the sky.



As you can see, I took a picture of it. I was around twelve when this

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was taken- I was at home, looking out my window, when my sister asked me to come outside. There was this massive, free-floating ball of light in the sky. At first, we thought it was just a big ass reflection of the moon. I wish I'd captured it in this picture, but the moon was just to the right. My mom said it was 'for filming', and she's probably right. The only thing that struck me as strange was that there was nothing supporting it.

It wasn't rising or falling, it was just sitting there. There were no poles, no ropes, nothing holding it up or down. How the fuck was it up there? This happened in a densely populated area of Los Angeles, so I wouldn't be shocked if it was for a film of some kind, but I'd like to know how the hell they got it up there.

When I was even younger, (back when I lived in a different house), I was in my bed. I was not an easy sleeper as a child, unfortunately. For reasons beyond me, I fought sleep as long as I could, literally just lying awake in bed. I was laying there, when I randomly felt like my entire bed was spinning. Like, in a 360 degree spin. It was an indescribable feeling- I remember jolting up in bed. My sister, who was in the top bunk, was still asleep, so obviously, the bed didn't actually spin, but it's mildly creepy that my brain created such a realistic illusion.

Finally, most recently, I was lying in bed (why does all the creepy stuff happen in bed), and I could've sworn the wall moved. I was watching it, and it literally *shifted over*. It was weird and a little concerning, but it hasn't happened since. Whatever, I guess.

Black Period

I really like poetry. I've decided to name this section '*Black Period*'.. At the moment, I am moving beyond something rather sad. (Knock on wood for me, would you?) I'm not depressed, thankfully, and I doubt that it will evolve to that level, but I'm still quite sad.

It's hard trying to heal and stay healthy. I'm struggling with the whole thing, but I know it'll get better. On top of that, I've realised I'm not straight. Throughout my entire life, I've been extremely sure. Recently, I developed a crush on a girl- I get to hang out with her soon, and I'm very excited, which is helping me 'let go' of the other thing. I still care deeply about the cause of the issue and their feelings, which is why it has been extremely difficult to put distance between us. I'll miss them a lot, and it's really hard knowing that it probably won't be what it was.

Whew. I've been holding onto that for a while. I'll also add some recipes to this part, so you can eat some food while reading. Just don't spill shit on the book. Also, maybe some pictures so you can look at something other than words.

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This is Some Crazy Fucked Up Salad

Did you know
That if you take a fist of seeds
Put them in the dirt
Watch them grow
Harvest them
When Autumn comes
And cut them up real small

Put them in a wooden bowl
Add a bit of oil
Use your hands
To mix it

And after you've done all that work
Place it in the freezer

Come back in a week's time
To find the salad frozen
You'll be shocked that it wasn't
Exactly the same
As how you left it?

Recipe for Crazy Fucked Up Quesadilla

1 pint of Roma tomatoes (sliced)
1 can of sliced black olives (drained)
½ a head of iceberg lettuce
Garlic (diced finely)
½ of a red onion
2 tablespoons of olive oil
However many white tortillas
A bunch of mozzarella and oaxaca cheese (shredded)
Salt and pepper or garlic (oooh) to taste
Pat of butter

Cook everything with the butter in a pan on medium heat until sizzling and slightly charred. Season. Then, combine shredded cheese with some of the vegetables and put in a tortilla. Fold tortilla. Cook until the cheese is melted. Must be eaten with a side of Baja Blast or Mountain Dew (bottled) and cheese fries with queso. Repeat for however many quesadillas you want to make. Goes well with ‘*Breaking Bad*’ (streamable on Netflix).

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Recipe for Kraft Mac N' Cheese

1 box of classic Kraft Mac N' Cheese

A little bit of butter (about the width of half your pinky finger)

Organic milk

A bowl

A fork (not a spoon)

A large-ish pot

Water

Fill the pot up about $\frac{3}{4}$ with water. Put the water on the stove on high heat (cover it with a lid if you can) until it bubbles a lot. Then, open the box of macaroni and take out the little pouch of cheese inside. Pour in the pasta and set a timer for seven minutes. Let it cook. Then, drain the pasta water (saving a little tiny bit at the bottom) and add the butter. Let the butter melt, mixing with a wooden spoon if necessary. Then, add the cheese. Add milk as necessary, making sure you don't add too much. Don't make it runny. Mix really well. Eat. Goes well with '*The Great British Baking Show*' (streamable on Netflix), or a good psychological horror film.

Temporary Workspace

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Horror Story- Credit to Roxy

Knock knock

Who's there?

Trump

Encelia Farinosa

Abigail Wegman was the love of my life. She was beautiful- her red hair fell perfectly in voluminous curls, framing her face. I vied for her attention- desperate for a smile, a glance. I sat behind her in Algebra. Sometimes, if the air conditioning blew from the vent in just the right way, a bit of fuzz from her sweater or a strand of her hair would fall on my desk. I never swept them away. She wore a brilliantly floral perfume, which twirled around you in long luxurious loops as she passed you in the hallway. After a few months, I just couldn't take it anymore. Tearing a corner of white paper from my textbook, I wrote her a note.

I love you, Abigail.

I passed it to her. She opened the note gingerly, as if I'd spit on it before handing it to her. I watched, my heart pounding, as her big blue eyes scanned the note.

"I'd rather shoot myself than kiss you, Michael," she said.

Once, I saw my father cry. He was a strong man- fierce in his will. He hadn't attended my birth. "Those things are for the women to handle," he'd say. Not once did my father tell me he loved me. I relied on my mother for what little affection she coughed up on Christmas or my birthday, and even then, my rations were meager. My mother and father hated each other. We'd hear them fight. They'd yowl at each other for hours, until my mother cried, or my father went out for the night. Those were long nights, staring at the ceiling, wondering if I'd wake up fatherless. He'd come home drunk.

"Where the *fuck* have you been?" My mother would scream.

"You know, Mary, I don't need to hear it. I work my ass off for this family, I can do whatever I please."

My father would lumber around, arguing with my mother for however long he could maintain consciousness. He'd collapse on the bed after a while, and, once he came to, they'd have pitiful, meaningless sex that rarely ended in orgasm. My father cried when my mother died- I was surprised. He was too drunk to know what he was doing to her; funny he cared the moment it counted. It was dark out that night. The neighbors would usually light their porch lamp, attracting moths to the glow. They didn't that night. He'd been gone for hours. My mother had always accused him of getting with other women. For this she resented him, reducing him to the verge of breakdown each time he returned home. Nobody had the heart to tell him about my mother and the mailman.

I'd wear my sister's dresses from time to time. I was twelve, tall and lanky. I liked the way they framed me, the way they flowed around my legs. My sister was always big for her age- I always swam in the extra yards of fabric. I don't remember when I discovered my fascination; my mother had wanted a little girl, one who wasn't like my sister. My mother drank too much, and, if she wasn't drinking, it was the Zolof and laxative cocktail. The news of her pregnancy put no boundary on her addiction. Martha had come out of my mother two months too early. Her face was a bit strange, almost lopsided. She didn't speak until she was four years old, didn't dress herself until she was seven. Martha relied on me entirely for survival. My mother wanted nothing to do with her.

"You know, we aren't really brothers," my brother used to tell me.

"Stop tryna' scare me, Lenny. We're brothers- nothing you can do about it."

"No. Mom got *shaped*. That's where you came from. It wasn't Daddy that got Mom pregnant."

"What's 'shaped'?"

"It's when another man gets Mom pregnant. We aren't really brothers, Mike."

Lenny grew up faster than any of us- then again, Mom put most of her hatred on his head. We'd be down at dinner, eating the run-of-the-mill rice and beans my mother had set down her bottle to heat. He'd lock himself in his room, playing the same record over and over as he leapt around his room, lip-synching. The ceiling lamp would sway side to side as the roof above us shook.

"The sky's falling, Martha." I told my sister. Though three years older than me, she was a hell of a lot dumber than I was.

"No it isn't, Mike! It's not!" She screamed.

"Can you hear it? The sky is falling." Martha would cry and cry, blubbering about the sky coming down.

Mom would go upstairs after dinner.

"Gimme your belt, Daniel. Gotta get through to that fuckin' kid somehow."

She focused her constant, red-hot laser beam of abuse between his eyes.

"You think we can't hear you jumping around up there? You think you're real special, huh?"

Lenny left that spring. He was only nineteen.

"Mom, I wanna *be somebody*. I want to get a job- get out of this."

"You think you're gonna make it, huh?"

"Goodbye, Mom. Call if Martha's sick again."

“Don’t you know how much I *love you*, Lenny? Don’t you know how much I *love you*?”

Martha was often outside, alone. She'd sit by herself next to the pond, catching fish and taking them from the water. Holding them tightly in her hand, she would pat their little heads until they stopped thrashing, going limp in her hand. Martha would run to me, cradling the body of the dead fish in her hand.

"Is he dead, Mike? Is he dead?"

"Yes, Martha. He's dead."

"Oh no, oh no!"

"It's okay, Martha. It was only a fish." I'd dig a small hole by the pond with a stick, dropping the fish inside.

"I'm gonna miss him, Mike," she'd say.

"I know, Martha."

I was used to being called a fag. My father caught me in Martha's room only once. She was seventeen, me, fourteen. Martha sat outside, wiping her tears after I had helped her bury the latest maimed fish. I'd seen some success in repressing my fascination, but I wasn't one to turn away should the opportunity arise. Martha's clothing was odd. She wore sweaters and long, floral dresses. I remember how my mother would dress me as a small boy- the tears in her eyes as she looked upon her son. She'd always wanted a daughter- one who wasn't like Martha. She couldn't stand Martha. I liked Martha's clothes- she was never too fancy. They smelled faintly of flowers and pond water; a musky scent that stuck to my hair as I pulled the dress over my head. I would stand there, in Martha's room, staring at my feminised reflection in her full-length mirror. Her mirror was always covered in fingerprints and smudges. Martha didn't understand mirrors. She'd see herself in them, and, confused, brush her fingers across the glass, as if expecting to feel the skin of her reflection. Standing there, in my favorite of Martha's dresses- a long blue one with lace finishing, my father walked in. He stood there for a second. Neither of us said a word.

"Take it off, Mike."

"Why?"

"Don't be a fuckin' fairy, Michael. Take it off, now."

"I'm not-"

"Take it off before your mother sees."

My father had a secret collection of pornography underneath his side of the mattress. When he'd go out for the night, I'd sneak past my mother in the living room. She was a corpse dressed in a red sweater- splayed dramatically over the couch, wine bottle in hand.

"You ruined my life, you know that, Mike?"

Some were photos of my mother when she was young. I held the polaroids in my hand, staring at the youthful face of the wretched woman who birthed me. The majority, however, consisted of magazines. There was one in particular- a 1982 Playboy. I'd sit on the floor of my parents' room, flipping mindlessly through the endless parade of airbrushed breasts and shaved labia. I never found them attractive- I liked the way their bodies, glistening beneath the studio lights, spoke to me. I didn't want to be them. I only wanted to watch.

Lenny called me once, after we were both out of the house. Upon realizing that Martha was growing and in need of care, my mother and father had borrowed from my Aunt Nina to send her to a home for ‘developmentally disabled children.’

“Don’t send her, dad,” I begged.

“I can take care of her. You don’t even need to worry. I’ll help.”

“The doctors said she’s regressing, Mike. She’s only bound to get worse.”

“I can handle it,” I said. Without realising, tears had begun to form in my eyes.

“The fuck are you cryin’ for? D’yknow how much we’re paying to get that retard outta here?” My dad said.

We never saw Martha again- she sent me several letters during the remainder of the time I spent with my parents- they were scrawled in a strange gibberish that was impossible to decode. I never responded.

“How are you, Mike?”

“I’m fine, Lenny.”

“You mad?”

“Sorta.”

“You know I had no choice, Mike. You know.”

“You did, Lenny. You left me to take care of Martha by myself.”

“You want to meet up? Grab a coffee?”

I hung up the phone. He knew what it meant.

Cattie was the first town that didn't foster my suicidal urges. After I turned eighteen, I began to dream. Mostly, my sleep before then was radio silence, so it was strange when I kissed girls as I slept.

"You'd better stay here, Mike. Your dad could use some help."

"Your mother needs you, Mike."

It didn't matter what they said. Martha was gone, and, despite having to care for her as if she were a toddler, I missed her.

"Stay here, Mike."

I packed my few possessions late on a Tuesday night. My father slept soundly, undisturbed by my mother's quiet sobs. I took little—my favorite of Martha's collared dresses, two pairs of socks and underwear, a sweater, my church pants. I slung my backpack, worn and dirty after use throughout my education, over my shoulder. As I walked down the stairs, the rhythmic patter of my feet in time with my mother's depressive episode, I took one last breath of air.

Stale smoke and cheap perfume filled my nose. My mother's cries became more desperate. She hiccupped, almost like a baby. I walked out the door. The night was warm and dark. Pulling the bus ticket I had purchased with the little money to my name from my pocket, I reveled in my newfound freedom.

It was dirty, dusty. The air smelled faintly of pineapple and sawdust. It was beautiful. My parents didn't approve of the West Coast- especially not Arizona. I didn't care. I got a job at a diner, working nights and weekends. It was hard work, but I loved it. I kept the money I earned- I'd always had to squirrel it away when I lived with my parents for fear my mother would steal it. During my ten minute break, I thought of many things. Mainly, girls. At nineteen, I'd never had sex. My virginity was a great source of shame. I remembered the first time Lenny brought a girl home.

She was blonde, skinny, and beautiful. I remembered her chest- massive and disproportionate to the rest of her figure, yet transfixing. I was sat on the couch, the television blaring before my eyes.

"Who's that, Lenny?"

"Shut up, Mike. Keep your nose in your own fuckin' business."

The girl giggled, apparently entertained by the atrocious state of our home.

"Come on, come on. My dad'll wake up." He grabbed her by the hand, rushing up the stairs.

I didn't sleep that night. Lenny and I shared a wall. Throughout the night, the bed frame banged against the wall, occasionally interrupted by a giggle or a gasp from the girl.

"Mmn...."

"Shut the fuck up. If my dad comes in here, I'm gonna take it in the ass-"

"Isn't your little brother next door?"

"Aw, he can't hear. Don't mind him."

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I met Penny a month into my time at Cattie. Her hair was dyed a dark shade of cherry red- I remember the way it contrasted with her shirt. Her tits were small, barely visible. I liked that about her. She spoke at a comfortable volume- not mouse-quiet, not shouting. "Hey, I'm Mike. I'll be taking care of you today. What can I get started for you?"

"I'll have a dirty Pepsi."

"Mhm."

"That's all."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

I brought her the Pepsi, and, without thinking, sat in the booth across from her.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Sittin' with you."

"Why?"

"Do you really wanna know?"

"Sure. Got nothin' else to hear."

"You're pretty."

She smiled.

"Wait, where'ya going?" I asked as she stood.

"None of your business, Mr. Mike," she said. She bent over the table, grabbing my pen from my shirt pocket. She smiled as she tore a bit of paper off the menu and began to write on it. I remember the way her pen tapped against the table. She folded it and placed it in my pocket. She walked away quietly, her skirt swishing.

"Hey, my pen?"

She ignored me.

I opened the note, still sat in the booth.
218-555-2213

Penny and I talked long into the night. She always knew the right thing to say.

“Where were you before this?” She asked.

“Indiana. With my parents. And Martha.”

“Who’s Martha?”

“My sister.”

“How is she?”

“I don’t know. My parents put her in a home last year.”

“Oh. What’s wrong with her?”

“There’s nothing wrong with her.”

“Sorry.”

“No, don’t be. My mother fucked her up when she was pregnant.”

“Ah. Disabled?”

“Yeah, you could call it that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s kind of cool. She’s like a kid forever.”

“Will you ever see her again?”

“I don’t think so.”

Penny fell in love with me. Heaven knows why I didn't let myself do the same for her. We'd spend all weekend in bed. The smell of her neck lingered on the hairs of my face- a mix of Love Spell and flour.

"We should get married," she'd say. She would talk endlessly about our future together, as if I were the only man in the world.

"If it's a girl, we'll go with Madeline. If it's a boy... I'm thinking- John? James? What do you think?"

"I don't know, Penny."

"Is everything okay? You're on edge."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine."

I'd reverted back to wearing Martha's dresses- desperate for connection to the mother, the family, that I'd never had. Penny matured. I did not.

"I can't be with you, Mike," she said. I was unfazed. I felt nothing.

"You won't touch me, you won't talk to me. It's like I don't exist, Michael."

"Don't call me that."

"You know what? Fuck you." She walked out. I never saw her again.

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For a while, I grieved the loss of Penny. I missed the way her hair bounced, the way she smelled. The way she walked. I had dreams of Penny- they were always the same. Penny- the human amalgamation of the desert- she spun in the sand, endlessly. The dirt stung my eyes as the hem of her skirt kicked up sediment. I loved Penny.

I forced myself to her front door, a bouquet of flowers stolen from a yard in hand. I knocked. A woman, taller and less pretty than Penny, answered.

“You here for the open house?”

“Oh. Uh, no.”

“Get off my property.”

I couldn’t believe she’d left. It somehow made her feel less real, more like a dream. I loved Penny.

Author's Note and Process

As I write this, I am on a plane from Phoenix to Los Angeles. I'll be completely honest; I wasn't really expecting this book to be this long. I suppose I just want it over with. Anyway, let me begin by thanking you, dearest reader, for choosing to read this book. You could've spent this time doing many other things- eating, sleeping, etc., but you chose to sit down and read my book. Thanks. I spent about a month writing this version. I hope that my next project will be longer, but for now, this feels like a decent compilation of my recent work. Before I close, I'd like to revisit a couple of stories in this book that I am particularly proud of to explain the process in which they were created- I feel like that may add some depth to it. Forgive me if I yap. I'll also add some images to convey what the inspiration was.

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Maxwell And Eloise

I started writing the concept for this story in October. I was watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas* with my family in Hollywood, and, when I watched the character relationship between Jack and Sally, I was randomly inspired. Like a complete psychopath, I got up from my seat, went to the bathroom, and began feverishly typing out an extremely rough beginning to *Maxwell and Eloise*. Here is the original setup:

“Eloise and Maxwell live in a dreamscape where it’s like a row of houses and they live across the street from each other. They finally figure out how they can be together but Maxwell wakes up to discover he’s a man in the hospital who has just lost his wife in a car accident and is left with their baby. The wife’s name is Elise in real life and his name is Sam. Continues with him drinking and putting himself into a coma to be with her in his mind. Ends with him, very old and sick in hospice(?) Their baby is a grown woman now and she says goodbye to him as he dies. He is reunited with Eloise/Elise in death, forever. They love to listen to Elton John.”

I have no idea why I decided to write that bit about the music they listen to, but I do like the contrast between the original idea and the final product. I’ve decided to leave my intentions in the story up to you. I don’t think it would be the same type of story if I went piece-by-piece in explaining what the point of the story was.

Alda and Alba

This is one of my favorite pieces I've ever written. It's a bit of a fever dream, which tends to be a recurring theme in my writing. I had a lot of fun coming up with the imagery of Ebony. Alba was inspired by Krobus, the sewer merchant from Stardew Valley (one of my favorite games). I'll put an image of him below for reference. Also, the landscape of Ebony was partially inspired by the waterfall in *Ambient Swim*'s 'Brutal Garden'.



The Melon Collie

As I believe I mentioned in the footer of this story, I was inspired to write it while listening to a Smashing Pumpkins album (*Mellon Collie and The Infinite Sadness*). I was dispersing the album, which I had just discovered was quite good, amongst my playlists when I misread the title as ‘Melon Collie’. Then, I got to thinking about a dog made of cantaloupe. It went downhill from there.

The Danny Poem

This one, as I previously stated, was written from a dream. I was barely awake when this happened, so my memory of it is slightly blurred, but it was a strange twilight-dream. In the dream, everything was dark, but in my ear, clear as day, I could hear a very obnoxious voice singing about a guy named Danny. I have no idea why this happened, and I also don't know why it resonated with me to the point where I woke up and the song was stuck in my head. I wanted to write it down somewhere, but, considering the only lyric to the song was "his name was Danny", there wasn't much to go off of. I based a rough poem on how I imagined Danny looked, and that was that.

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The Pill

I had a lot of fun writing this one. I had an idea where a guy takes a pill that is going to kill him, but he doesn't know when. As I was writing it, I had Marlowe yell at Beck, and I thought, *Beck's a misogynistic asshole, he'd probably kill her*. Then, I got to thinking about why Beck was taking the pill in the first place- maybe because he killed someone *else*? I sort of ran with the idea.

Honorable Mentions

I've had a couple different ideas over the duration of this book. Firstly, there was the original concept for *Ethel Fields*. I have no idea where this came from, but I remember the idea striking me and enthusiastically writing it down in my notes app. It wound up a measly three sentence poem about war. Second, there was the weird dream I had about a cartoon crow. It was reminiscent of *The Skeleton Dance* (the Walt Disney & Ub Iwerks short), but, like the Danny dream, it was remarkably vivid. Typically, I have boring ass dreams about going to school, but this one was about a cartoon crow singing a song about America being lost. I have no idea what prompted this, but I am frustrated having forgotten the American crow's lyrics. Lastly, there was an idea that I had about someone who "has a brain tumor and sees ghosts but thinks they're hallucinations". To be completely honest, I think *any* ghost story idea I come up with will wind up being too close to *Sixth Sense*. Aside from the fact that it would've been a rearranged shot-for-shot of *Sixth Sense*, I also lost interest in the story.

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That about wraps it up, I think.

If I had the printer ink, I would list everyone who gave me the happiness to write this book. My family and friends- the people who saved my life- are at the very top. Were it not for you, I might still be drunk in front of Young Sheldon. Thanks for all your help.

Of course, the creative writing conservatory. Y'all are pretty skibidi. I appreciate you. Beyond that, I'd like to pay special attention to the real heroes: coffee, cereal, and Instagram reels. I put my reels feed above my need for water- a special thank you to the creator of Instagram for my wonderfully stupid for you page. I'd like to thank my grandparents, Linda and Jon, for frequently donating to my school and for generously offering to contribute in the payment of my computer.

I listened to a variety of albums and songs as I wrote this, which I feel I should list. Let me put you on:

The Danish Girl- Original Soundtrack by Alexandre Desplat

Clara Rockmore's Lost Theremin Album by Clara Rockmore

Let Her Dance by the Bobby Fuller Four

In The Aeroplane Over The Sea by Neutral Milk Hotel

French Exit by TV Girl

Feel The Pain by Dinosaur Jr.

How's It Going to Be by Third Eye Blind

Some Dispute Over T-Shirt Sales by the Butthole Surfers

Evelyn Evelyn by Evelyn Evelyn

Mother Earth's Plantasia by Mort Garson

Rio by Duran Duran

Unicorn by Bel Canto

Odie's Mix (One Of My Spotify Playlists)

And with that, I'd like to conclude *Pretty Thing, Pretty Baby, Pretty Much*. Thanks a whole bunch for reading it.